A ROMANCE OF CANVAS TOWN

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AND OTHER STORIES

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CANVAS TOWN

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BY

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AUTHOR OF 'ROBBERY UNDER ARMS,' 'THE SQUATTER'S DREAM,'
'THE MINER'S RIGHT,' ETC.

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A ROMANCE OF CANVAS TOWN

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DWELLERS in Melbourne during 1851 and the immediately succeeding years of the golden age in Australia will remember Canvas Town. Good cause, doubtless, have certain prosperous citizens to recall the strange suburb of Melbourne across the river, in which they, with hundreds of strangers and pilgrims, were fain to abide, pending suitable lodgings or employment. It arose mushroom-like from the bare trampled clay, a town of tents and calico, at no great distance from Prince's-bridge, shouldering the road which then led to the fashionable suburb of South Yarra.

Its *raison d'être* was briefly this. When tidings of the wondrous yields of Ballarat and Forest Creek —of gold dust and ingots, so profuse, so easily won —reached Europe, fleets of vessels bearing armies of adventurers set sail for Eldorado. When the flotilla anchored in Hobson's Bay, disembarking in crowds, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the delicately nurtured with the rudely reared, there was simply no place to put them, nowhere for them to go.

For in Melbourne, houses and cottages, huts and hotels were alike full, more than full, with legitimate

occupants. The verandahs and even the back yards were utilised as dormitories. A list of the extraordinary makeshifts for bedrooms then in common use would read like a chapter from the *Hunting of the Snark* or kindred literature. Only with this difference, that the nonsense would all be true,—terribly true.

What, then, was to be done? Filled with auriferous fancies and fables, it was yet impossible for all of these inexperienced, untravelled innocents to march at once for the diggings. Many had imagined that they could 'step over,' on arrival, to the golden fields, and commence the colonial industry of nugget gathering without loss of time.

To fathers of families—some of near kin to Mr. Micawber—to raw lads, to the feeble, the sick, the penniless—there were many of these last—it may easily be imagined how terrible was the first experience of the strange, inhospitable, and apparently savage land in which they found themselves.

Landed at Sandridge or on the wharves of Melbourne, in the midst of rude, jostling crowds, what misery must many of them have undergone! I fear me that the complacent colonists, thriving and experienced, fully aware of the fact that all property, whether of stock, land, stations, or houses, had become enormously enhanced in value, must have seemed to the forlorn emigrants hard and unfeeling. There was a savour of selfishness, surely, about the way in which the herd of helpless strangers—gentle and simple, good, bad, or indifferent—was permitted to go its own road, to sink or swim, with but little aid or counsel from their countrymen in Victoria.

The deadly wharf-struggle over, it became a vital

question with the houseless horde where to go and how to shelter themselves. There, indeed, was the rub! Melbourne, as before stated, was crammed full. They could not camp in the streets. They were unprepared for the bush. They knew not which way to turn. Whether, in some semi-official way, directed to locate themselves upon the site, long famous and memorable, or, whether as being within reach of the Yarra, of the town, and apparently unoccupied, and unowned, the bright idea of "pegging out" struck some smart pilgrim, and the rest followed suit, cannot be known. But almost in a night Canvas Town arose, and became a localised, tangible fact.

About that time there lived in the pastoral region of Victoria, occasionally visiting Melbourne like his brethren, when a decent excuse offered, a squatter named Evan Cameron. This young person had lately brought a draft of fat cattle from his station near the mouth of the Glenelg. The season being that of winter, the weather bad, and his assistant strictly unreliable, he had been sorely tried and endured hardship. But, as he had sold the drove at an unprecedentedly high price, and was even now enjoying a well-earned holiday, the memory of his privations was becoming faint and obscure.

One of his recreations during his season of idlesse was to ride a handsome blood mare of his own breeding, which he had brought down with some such intention, around the suburbs where his visiting acquaintances and friends abode. Carmen was a grand, upstanding, hunter-looking animal, and when thus mounted, and by no means badly dressed,

Mr. Cameron judged that he was not unlikely to produce a favourable impression upon any stray princess or other feminine personage whom he might encounter.

This curious hamlet in the track to South Yarra and St. Kilda fascinated him. He used to ride quietly through its chief thoroughfares, observing the manners and customs of the variously differentiated dwellers therein. It was with no unkindly feeling that he did this. More than a barren spirit of curiosity and idle questioning actuated him. With regard to newly-arrived people—the men, of course—he had been in the habit of asserting that no one need fare badly in this country who chose to work. That they could always find well-paid employment. That there was no such thing as bad luck; and so on. Some of which dogmatic utterances he found occasion in the after-time to modify considerably.

'What a curious sight,' he used to say to himself, 'is this!' as the big, bright-skinned mare went lounging down the narrow paths, snorting occasionally, and pretending to be afraid of the people and things she saw. For they performed most of their household offices in front of their dwellings. Misery and hard usage had made them callous. Whether they thought no one could possibly recognise them, or because nearly all of us are creatures of circumstance, some who plainly had seen better days and far other surroundings were singularly careless as to appearances. 'Don't be affected,' he said one day to Carmen, who was turning up her nose, so to speak, at a piebald horse in a baker's cart standing across the way.

The baker stood talking to a stout young fellow in a fur cap, who had 'Seven Dials' legibly imprinted on his visage. He was sitting on a wheelbarrow, while a pale woman was washing in a tub placed upon two buckets on the side of the road. 'Why, I thought you was off to the diggings, Towney!' said the baker.

'Not if I knows it,' answered the Londoner. 'The missus here's getting twelve shillin' a dozen for washin'. That'll keep us until I can get some light work about the town. I'm not agoin' to kill myself at the diggins, don't you believe it. I'm on for a beer-shop, or somethink in that line, as soon as we can rise it.'

Evan Cameron listened to this statement with deep disgust, noticing at the same time that two tents immediately above in the row were closed, as if the occupants were out, or did not wish to be seen. As he moved away, knitting his brows and cursing this nefarious burly costermonger living upon his wife's hard earnings, longing also to knock him head first into his own barrow, a young girl came from the direction of the town towards the two men, who were directly across her path. She was plainly but not poorly dressed, and was followed by a handsome retriever. Her whole air was of the deepest despondency, and as she walked slowly and falteringly along, Mr. Cameron thought, looking at her slight figure and downcast, drooping countenance, that no painter could have fallen upon a finer model for hopeless misery and despair.

As she approached the baker's cart she looked up suddenly, thereby exhibiting, as Evan thought,

an exceedingly pleasing, refined cast of countenance; also large, plaintive brown eyes, with a startled, deer-like expression. What with the men and the wheel-barrow, the washing-tub and the baker's cart, the thoroughfare was completely blocked. The men looked at her in a way which increased her confusion but did not offer to stir. The girl had stopped and commenced a detour, but the retriever, anxious to make a short cut, walked between the two men. As he did so the man called Towney gave the poor brute a savage kick. At the dog's sharp cry in agony the girl turned hastily, and confronted the man. 'Oh, don't hurt Friend, don't, pray! He is my poor sick brother's dog.' Here sobs prevented further speech, but as she stood with upraised, tearful countenance, forgetful of her natural timidity, Evan thought that the enterprising painter above referred to would have found an equally good model for another successful sketch, 'Innocence defending the helpless.'

As he dismounted hastily, leaving Carmen to her own devices, he was just in time to hear the rough growl out, 'You be hanged and your brother too; you're too fine to pal in with my missus; for two pins I'd sarve you as I did the dawg.'

'Not while there's a *man* within reach, you scoundrel!' shouted Evan, giving the grinning baker a shove, which sent him staggering against his cart, and the next minute administering a scientific 'taste of the upper cut' to Mr. Towney, which sent him down with such emphasis that the back of his head knocked against one of his wife's buckets.

'You had better walk towards your tent, I think,'

Evan said to the young lady, offering his arm politely. 'I will guarantee that you are not further molested. Did I understand you to say that your brother was ill? I may perhaps be of some slight service.'

The girl looked doubtfully in the stranger's face, and then, perhaps reassured by the honest expression of Evan's gray eyes, answered, 'I have just been to see him at the hospital. He is worse to-day; and oh, I am afraid he is dying! What shall I do, what shall I do in this strange country, alone and friendless that I am?' Here she burst into a passion of sobs and tears, and for a few minutes was unable to speak.

At that moment the flap of the other closed tent was pushed open and a tall man appeared. His face was ashen pale, the gloom of despairing sorrow lay over it like a pall.

'What is wrong, Miss Melton?' said he, in a half-absent manner, with his eyes fixed on vacancy. 'You must pardon my inattention. Is there anything that I can do for you?'

'I am selfishly forgetting others in my own distress,' she said, hastily drying her eyes. 'I was annoyed by that rude man next door; but this gentleman came kindly to my assistance. How is your poor wife?'

'She is dead. Dead!' he gasped out. 'Gone for ever! My love could not keep her here. How could she leave me? You see the most wretched of living men; Isora, O my beloved! But I shall not live long after you.' Here the miserable man made as though he would cast himself upon the earth,

wailing and lamenting in passionate abandonment. 'O God, why hast Thou suffered this? Was she not angelically patient, sweet, humble, fearing Thee, keeping Thy laws, in charity with all? and Thou hast permitted her to die. *Her!* In pain too, and dire wretchedness! Is there a God of justice, or are all the creeds but mockeries of the Fiend?'

'Hush, Mr. Montfort,' said the young lady softly. 'Oh, do not rave so wildly. *She* would not have suffered it. You will think of her soft pleadings now, will you not? How good and patient she always was.'

'She was an angel!' cried the mourner, striking his forehead. 'What is Alan Montfort that he should have been the love of her youth, the husband of her choice? If he had been a man, with the instinctive sense of the humblest labourer, her life would have been saved. You will come, Alice, and look on her now? She loved you in life—ah, so well!'

Together they turned towards the opening in the tent, when Evan Cameron, who had looked pityingly on, awe-stricken in the presence of the stranger's irreparable sorrow, tied Carmen to a fortunately placed stake, and came forward to make adieu, being no longer necessary in any capacity that he could imagine.

The young lady halted, and cordially thanked him for his timely aid. Her face was grave, but her eyes conveyed the idea to Evan's mind that but for the sadness of her present surroundings her gratitude would have been more feelingly expressed.

Suddenly the stranger, whom she had called Mr.

Montfort, after gazing at him with widely-opened, rayless eyes, exclaimed, 'Your face is familiar, as of one whom I knew in youth. My boyhood was spent in Australia. Surely you are Evan Cameron?'

'As certainly as you are my old schoolfellow Alan Montfort. Great God, what a meeting! What would I not have given to have known of you being here these weeks that I have been in town?'

'It matters not. Nothing matters now in this world, Evan! But you are an old friend; come into this wretched hovel with this dear girl who loved her—cherished her—and see my beloved while still her beauty is untouched.'

With a groan Montfort walked forward, followed by Miss Melton; bareheaded and reverently Evan Cameron also entered, then stood silent and heart-thrilled, while the wretched husband sank upon a rude seat and covered his face with his hands. The sobs which shook his whole frame told the depth of his agonised grief.

On a meanly-draped but scrupulously neat bed lay the corpse of a supremely beautiful woman. Her long black hair, drawn back from her ivory forehead, lay in silken masses upon the pillow; her large dark eyes were open; the delicately-pencilled eyebrows, the long-fringed eyelashes, all, as in life, perfect and unchanged. Her slightly-parted lips seemed but modelled for a smile, almost could one fancy that she was recovering from a faint, and would commence to live and love afresh.

'Surely she is not dead? Oh, can there be hope?' exclaimed the girl, stepping to her side, and pressing her lips to her forehead. Cold, alas, was the

pearly brow, rigid the lovely lips, rayless with fixed regard the wondrous eyes, that never more would look on him she loved too well—loved better than home and friends, than the world's honours and gifts, the favour of Royalty, the adoration of the great.

All these had Isora Delmar quitted to follow her love to a far-off, unknown land. To live for months in a hovel such as her father's hinds had never entered. To pine and waste silently for lack of needful things, nay, of the common necessaries of life. And at length, patient, hopeful, loving to the last, to lie dead on a miserable pallet in this hamlet of outcasts, in a strange land, with but one friend of her own sex, and she, alas! oh bitter fate! forced to be absent when she drew her latest breath.

The girl threw herself on her knees by the bedside, and taking the wasted hand of the dead woman in hers, kissed it, weeping bitterly. Evan Cameron's heart ached, as he could not but observe in the mean abode the painful evidences of the gradual tightening of the grasp of poverty. The man's costly outfit had been sold long before; her trinkets, and indeed less superfluous possessions had, no doubt, gone gradually. These piteous sales of the goods of the strangers—too literally sacrifices—were then matters of such everyday occurrence in Melbourne as to call forth no remark. With the exception of a few cooking utensils, the smallest assortment of crockery, a table, a rude sofa, two wooden chairs and a portmanteau, there was nothing more to be seen in that bare tenement, in which these two well-born, misguided victims had lived for months.

It may be asked, How could such things be in

Melbourne in 1852? Was not the place running over with money? Was there not work for any man with strong arms and a willing heart? Had this Mr. Montfort a tongue in his head? Had he not friends who would have helped him? We refuse to believe it.

It is hard to persuade the prosperous people of the world—whether that world be old or new—that persons in want of money or the necessaries of life are not culpable, if not criminal. If the true history of that terrible time were written it would be abundantly proved that many of the poor, innocent, inexperienced souls who came here 'in the fifties' in all good faith to seek their fortunes, underwent deadly dangers and sad privations—were often reduced to depths of utter despair ere good fortune or 'colonial experience' came to their aid.

What were they to do? let me ask, in their interest, as *amicus curiæ*. They had miscalculated their means, they had shrunk from going straight to the diggings, and if with sisters, wife, or children, what wonder? The money began to run short. What next? Try to get work? It was not so easy; few people were inclined to take as groom or gardener, cook, or waiter, a man obviously unused to such employments, and without references. I am thinking of the gentlefolk who, sick at heart, day by day, wandered about, fruitlessly trying to comprehend Australia. Pinched with hunger in a land of gold, amid millions of beeves; starving in the most plenteous food-producing country under the sun! Too proud to beg or to apply to relatives! Small wonder that in the very midst of our careless, hard-judging,

hastily-gilded era, tragedies like the one I have sketched were almost of weekly occurrence.

'You had better both go, now,' the girl said gently. 'I will close her eyes—dear, lovely, lost Isora! Take him with you,' she whispered to Evan; 'you are old friends, it seems. It will relieve him to tell all his mind to you. When he returns I shall have dressed her in her last robes.'

'Allow me to call to-morrow,' said Mr. Cameron. 'You may trust me for all aid and counsel in his affairs—and your own,' he added. 'No! you must really not deny me the pleasure of helping you. Our meeting was providential.'

With a warm pressure of the hand the newly-made friends and fellow-workers parted. He drew Montfort away, and listened to the sad recital, mingled with bursts of passionate grief, in which he told the tale of their hurried marriage, and his ill-judged determination to quit his regiment and sail for the land of gold.

'But I will never leave her,' he cried aloud in conclusion. 'She shall stay with me until her fair body is committed to the earth, and then I will die on her grave rather than quit the place where she lies.'

On the morrow Evan Cameron arranged with a disposer of the dead to perform his mournful office, and privately gave directions for an inner coffin of lead to be provided as well as the more ornate casket in which the jewel of Alan Montfort's existence would be deposited. Yet, mindful of the claims of the living, in whom he had commenced to feel a strong and increasing interest, he betook himself to

the Melbourne Hospital. There, gaining audience of the resident surgeon, to whom he was fortunately known, he requested information concerning one Arthur Melton.

'Fever ward, No. 3; new arrival; very low yesterday,' answered that gentleman, with professional brevity. 'Sister, nice girl; will be here directly. Report better to-day; taken a turn towards recovery, I think. See what the escort brought down this week?'

No! Mr. Cameron had not seen it, and didn't care if every rascally digger was kicked out of the country again. The gold epidemic was a kind of cholera or yellow fever (no pun intended). The country was going to the devil, fast. But he was glad to hear the poor young fellow was better.

'How about the price of bullocks, Mr. Squatter?' said the doctor, laughing. 'Besides, the gold brings nice people to the colony, relatives of patients, and so on! Well, if this young fellow rallies—and I think he will—a little country air will do him good and the young lady too. Ah, sly dog! Now good-bye! Patients don't like waiting.'

Mr. Cameron rattled Carmen along Swanston Street, and across the Yarra bridge, much faster than he generally did over metal. In consequence of which imprudence, he met Alice Melton coming along towards the Yarra, on her way to the hospital. It was only natural that he should dismount and offer to walk beside her, while he communicated the welcome news of her brother's improvement in health. Carmen led well too, having perhaps had previous practice.

The girl's face lit up with an expression of joy and gratitude, which Evan thought perfectly heavenly, as she exclaimed, 'Oh, how kind of you! How shall I ever be able to thank you sufficiently?'

Evan thought it might be managed, but was too wise to say so. Then he told her of his arrangement as to poor Mrs. Montfort's burial, of which she expressed approval.

'I am afraid she must have suffered much,' he said. 'Poor Alan! when we were boys together, how little could we foresee a meeting like this!'

'No one knows what she went through,' said the girl. 'Bravely, and so sweetly, she bore everything. Mr. Montfort did what he could, but he is one of those helpless men who either do things wrongly or not at all. They must have nearly starved often. My brother was so different before the wretched fever took him. He used to chop wood and draw water for people, catch fish, and shoot ducks, that poor Friend used to swim in for; kept up his spirits too, and said he was sure he could save enough to get a nice little cottage for us both before long. He liked the country from the beginning.'

'And then?' queried Evan.

'Then he took ill after a long hard day's work in some back lane in Melbourne. We spent nearly all our money before he was removed to the hospital. He was at his lowest the day I saw you, and I was then the most wretched despairing girl in the world, I really believe.'

'But now you begin to hope?'

'Yes, really I do,' she said, smiling in spite of herself (she had beautiful teeth, certainly, thought

Evan), 'and, but for poor Mrs. Montfort's death, and his misery, poor fellow, I could feel almost happy.'

'Evidently of a cheerful disposition,' he reflected; 'sensitive and sympathetic, but easily recalled to her original sunshine.'

Miss Melton came out from the hospital much cheered and comforted by her visit to her brother, in whose face she saw tokens of certain recovery. She insisted upon returning at once to Canvas Town, however, for the purpose of attending to the despairing Montfort, who, she said, sat gazing at his dead wife for hours. She was really afraid he would destroy himself. It was her duty to remain with him. It relieved his mind at intervals to talk to her of his lost Isora.

When Evan Cameron rode next day to Canvas Town, another phase of the tragedy with which he had come to be so strangely mixed up, was presented. Miss Melton issued from Montfort's tent, and motioning to him hastily to enter, went into her own dwelling.

He pushed aside the canvas and, to his great surprise, saw another man, whom he recognised as Alan Montfort's elder brother. He greeted Cameron warmly, and appeared much gratified at meeting him. The dead woman lay in her coffin, her pale, calm beauty still unchanged, while near her stood her husband, gazing with the same rapt, intense earnestness, apparently still unable to divest himself of a feeling that her case was not past hope.

Leaving him unchanged in posture, the two men walked out and stood for some seconds gazing silently at the busy scene beyond the river.

'What an extraordinary chance,' said Charles Montfort, at length, 'that you should have discovered my unfortunate brother here. You of all people! When we were schoolfellows together who could have dreamt that we three should meet thus?'

'That young lady who has just gone out and the dog, Friend, were the principal agents,' replied Cameron. 'How I wish we had met a month earlier—and it might so easily have been. Hard that all came so late!'

'Hard indeed. That girl is an angel, poor Alan says. Nursed his wife and her brother till her own life was nearly the forfeit. But we have no time to lose. It is the saddest fate. Alan, it seems, eloped with his wife. Her friends, wealthy and aristocratic, would not hear of their marriage. He had only his commission and was in debt. But you know his headstrong, reckless nature. Handsome and attractive to women always, Isora Delmar fell in love with him. Their flight and voyage to this country followed —most unhappily for all.'

'He intended, I suppose, to go to the gold-fields?'

'Yes, of course. On reaching Melbourne he found it inexpedient to take his wife there. His money came to an end. We had paid his debts twice before, and he was unwilling to apply to his family again. Buoyed up with the hope of finding employment, official or otherwise, he deferred writing home until it was too late. Too late! Last week I got his first and only letter, and came at once by the steamer from Adelaide. She returns to-morrow. I must take him back there if I can only persuade him.'

'Time may change the nature of his grief,' said Cameron. 'But is he unwilling to go?'

'He declares that he will not leave his Isora. We must take the body with us. And here, now, is the difficulty. He refuses to allow the coffin lid to be nailed down. He insists upon a daily visit from a medical man. He believes that she will revive.'

'A young doctor at my hotel told me that he wanted to get to Adelaide. Bob Wilson is a very clever fellow. I will find him out to-night. For the rest, the lid of the coffin can be rendered movable at will. The man that made it can manage that. Poor Alan! Poor fellow! Let us go in and talk to him.'

After long argument the unhappy man seemed dimly to comprehend the necessity of the step proposed. To Cameron he appeared grateful, and eventually promised to go with him. After nightfall a vehicle was procured, in which the friends conveyed the corpse of the ill-fated Isora Montfort to the steamer *Admella*—herself a fated ship—under the still-continued jealous watchfulness of her husband. They reached in due course the Montfort estate in South Australia, and in a secluded dell, where others of the household slept their long sleep, all that was mortal of that incarnation of grace, beauty, and virtue which men once called Isora Delmar was laid. Here could Alan Montfort wander and muse—outwatch the midnight hour! Here he chafed at the slowly passing days of a ruined life. Here he prayed for the hastening of that hour when the Death Angel should unlock the gates of the spirit world and relume their immortal love.

For Evan Cameron, the strangely-initiated adventure bore a far different termination. Lodgings for Miss Melton and her brother were procured with a lady of his acquaintance, who had herself known bereavement in the land of light and shadow. He sent for Arthur to his station, when able to travel by easy stages, the doctor having advocated removal to the pure air of the country. 'A manly, plucky young Englishman, really a splendid fellow,' Evan told every one. Arthur Melton took to bush life from the first. As men were scarce in those disturbed days, he soon became useful, then valuable, on the station. He wrote such delightful accounts of life at Barrawonga to his sister that, backed up by 'proper representation' on the proprietor's part, Alice Melton was induced to make trial of it, and indeed, in due time, as Mrs. Evan Cameron, to take up her permanent residence there. They all agreed in the aftertime, that it was a fortunate hour in which Evan rode the unwilling Carmen through the narrow, uninviting main street of Canvas Town.

THE FENCING OF WANDAROONA

A RIVERINA REMINISCENCE

CHAPTER I

'I INTEND to stick to the house this morning. What a sensation the very cutting of the leaves of a new magazine gives one! There is the tale you wish to see the end of, the fresh, clean pages, the certainty of something new, if not original—why! hosts of literary ideas seem to issue from the very paper-knife. Surely, few people can enjoy reading so thoroughly as we squatters do,' pursued Gilbert Elliot (dividing the inviolate pages of his *Cornhill*). 'All conditions so favourable. Appetite sharpened by abstinence, and an occupation permitting priceless intervals of true leisure, by which I mean seasons of repose succeeding unremitting toil. For instance, until this morning, we have hardly had an hour's rest for the last fortnight —no respite from riding, drafting, sheep-counting, or sheep-hunting. Sheep from morning to night; from night till morning. What a blessed thing to be able to abstract one's thoughts for a few hours from what men call business, and to realise, however faintly, that this beautiful world is not a partially-stocked run, waiting to be filled with merinoes.'

Thus Mr. Gilbert Elliot of Wandaroona Station,

Lower Murrumbidgee, in the colony of New South Wales, on a certain fine Sunday morning.

'Thoroughly jolly, as you say—did I catch the exact words?' assented his brother Hobbie, lazily looking up from the *Home News*. 'I feel like a Red Cross Knight having a lounge in the castle of his lady-love, though how the unlucky beggars managed to pass the time when there was no fighting on hand without books or tobacco, I cannot imagine. Luckily, the said fighting unspoiled by gunpowder, was a steady-going leisurely sort of recreation. Apparently, also, getting drunk was a work of time. Our Border forefathers that the dear old governor used to tell us about, gave and took a good deal of banging before any one was killed outright, like Sir Albany Fetherstonhaugh in the ballad; he had odds against him too.

'Heigho! I wonder if ever we *shall* make money enough at Wandaroona to see the old country and look up the ruined keep into which my ancestor and namesake chivied the Red Reiver of Westburnflat; wouldn't it be grand?

'Ha! do my eyes deceive me or is that a man on foot turning into the station track?'

'A man sure enough,' pronounced Gilbert, dropping the *Cornhill* as he spoke, 'and confoundedly like a shepherd too.'

'A shepherd!' echoed Hobbie despairingly—as who should say 'a bushranger!' 'No! Fate couldn't be so unkind.'

'It's that new fellow we hired for the weaners at Pine Hut, or I'm a Chinaman,' persisted the elder. 'I know him by the fur cap the scoundrel has on.

May the devil fly away with him! I wish every shepherd between here and Carpentaria was boiled down. It's all they are fit for. Here, Flying Mouse! Mouse!' (Goes to the back door and shouts loudly.) To him enter an elfish mite of an aboriginal boy.

'You plenty run up *yarraman*—saddle that one Damper and Kingfisher—you man 'um Squib—*burra burri*.'

Some explanation of these incongruous acts and deeds so closely following far different intentions, and evoked by nothing more startling than the appropriate apparition of a shepherd, is plainly demanded. During the ordinary and satisfactory transaction of life on a sheep station shepherds are never seen by day except in charge of their flocks. They are not permitted, for any reason whatever, to leave them by day, and only occasionally at night, when, their flocks being safely yarded, they elect to walk in to make necessary purchases at the station. At all other times a shepherd unattached, seen approaching the homestead, is a precursor of evil, a messenger of bad tidings, causing general alarm and excitement.

Nearer and still nearer came the personage in the fur cap, rueful of countenance and ludicrously important as the bearer of a tale of woe.

'How many sheep have you lost?' bluntly demands Hobbie.

'Bin and 'ad a smash, sir,' quoth the hireling in hoarse tones, intended to convey deep regret and concern—'bin and dropped a wing o' my sheep. They was as quiet in the yard as old ewes till I

heard 'em rush in the middle of the night, and afore I could get anigh them they was off into the scrub on the hill—in a body—as one might say.'

'When was this?'

'The day before yesterday, sir.'

'Then why the deuce didn't you come in, as you ought to have done, and report the loss at once?'

'Well, sir!' pleaded the delinquent, swaying his body backward and forward, 'I was next to certain as I'd drop across 'em every moment—I'm well aware, sir, as I ought to have started in, but I walked all day yesterday till I was footsore and too dead-beat to come in at night——'

'You knew perfectly well,' retorted Gilbert, 'that I've always told you in case of lost sheep to come in that moment and report. By trying to find them yourself, you have left them a day and a night out, giving them every chance to get killed by the dingoes. It would serve you right if I made you pay for all losses. There—go into the kitchen and get something to eat.'

'Oh dear!' groaned Hobbie. 'I thought our quiet morning over books and papers was too lovely to last! Think of that idiot wandering about on foot all day and yesterday. Shepherds always fancy they can find their sheep themselves and so escape the blame of the situation. Come along!'

In a few seconds after this dialogue — how different, alas! from the philosophic calm of the preceding one—three horsemen might have been noted, who rode at speed towards the north. The pace was reckless, the expression on the countenances

of the riders darkly anxious. A sullen silence was maintained for several miles, then a slackening of speed took place, also a slight escape of steam.

'Hang all shepherds!' jerked out Hobbie, with such concentrated fervour that Gilbert in the midst of his woes could not help smiling.

'Think of our dear day's reading that we had chalked out, and this precursor of the fiend coming nearer and nearer all the time, to change it with one word into this kind of thing.'

'Amen! to the first part of the prayer,' cordially assented Gilbert. 'Shepherds are about one degree better than wild dogs, with which beasts of prey, by the way, they seem rather to sympathise.'

'Hunting for lost sheep is the most depressing work I know. You have a long, dreary ride, you *must* lose a few sheep — you may lose many, especially if they have been a second night out.'

'If that fur-capped lunatic had only come in the first morning! But we must hit out. It is sixteen miles to his hut, and then we have the tracks to find——'

Away, away, through box-forest, plain, and pine-wood; Flying Mouse pulling hard as Squib, a narrow, wiry blood weed, fully convinced that he was in for some species of Scurry Stakes — such being the style of contest in which he annually acquired glory — came racing past his masters, jumping over logs and rocks like a goat, and grazing the legs of the imperturbable Flying Mouse against saplings. In considerably under two hours they halted at a hill, one side of which was thinly wooded, sloping gently towards a plain. On the hillside was

a small hut, and a large brush yard. 'Now then, Flying Mouse—you look alive, you see 'em track—they've made this way, no, t'other way, feeding in a circle just to bother us.'

'That one jumbuck yan 'longa scrub, plenty track all about,' said the blackboy authoritatively, with his keen roving eyes nailed to the ground as he moved off across the wooded portion of the hill.

'Leave them alone for that, the troublesome brutes,' grumbled Hobbie, morbidly prejudiced in this dark hour against the innocent merinoes, 'Get on, Mouse!'

The trail, once hit off, was never lost by the swart child of the waste, who showed where the disbanded flock had crossed the belt of scrub into a gully, spreading out after a fashion which seemed expressly calculated to mislead; then, that they had headed straight for the river — where they had suddenly turned short in their tracks at the apparent dictation of the evil one; farther on another abrupt divergence, and lastly, a sudden halt and rounding up.

Gazing long at the trampled grass, Flying Mouse raised his head with the air of a diplomate, who, by unerring steps of evidence, had arrived at his adversary's position.

'Me thinkum dingo,' he said conclusively.

'Ha! you seeum crow?'

It was even so. Under a tree upon which sat the bird of doom, lay half a dozen well-grown weaners, bearing about fourteen months' wool, their torn throats and flanks showing that the tyrant of the fields had been at his usual work.

'Six killed and I suppose about twenty bitten,' said Gilbert—'pretty work for a beginning—of course they have split up and scattered here to make things nicer.'

'No use grumbling,' remonstrated Hobbie. 'Spoils one's digestion, and does no good. We must accept the inevitable and make up our minds to be glad if we get out of this smash with a loss of thirty or forty. There are sheep! Hurrah!'

In a glade of the forest a few sheep were espied just about to join a respectable body of others, from which they had temporarily separated. Having counted them, which was effected by driving them round the end of a fallen log, it was apparent that they had recovered nearly one-half of the flock, but among them a dozen or more with red stains amid the wool, showed by their languid movements that they had felt the fangs of 'the Australian wolf.'

'These bitten sheep will die,' remarked Gilbert gloomily. 'I wonder how many lots the others are in? You go towards the half-way waterhole with these, Hobbie; I will keep on after the rest.'

'All right; I'll wait there till you come.' After much riding hither and thither, and tracking and hunting, three other small lots of the sheep were found by Gilbert and Flying Mouse and driven to the half-way waterhole. Being counted there it was found that only 227 were still missing of the 2300 which had but a week since been carefully counted out to him of the fur cap. Nothing more could be done that night, so the brothers, having deposited their sheep in an unused but dog-proof yard, started for home, which they reached about midnight.

There they unsaddled their sobered horses, upon whose backs they had been sitting for the last fourteen hours without food or rest for man or brute. They were not on this account treated with extraordinary marks of attention. Popping their saddles and bridles into the harness-room they left their hardy nags to 'browse beneath the midnight dews,' a refreshment which they were not too fastidious to decline.

All hands were on the war-path early on Monday morning, where, after an hour's riding, they met one of the other shepherds with his flock. 'Well, Growlson, good-day, sheep all right?'

'Good-day, sir,' returned the Arcadian gruffly, 'dessay it's all good-day with you—my sheep's all adoin' as bad as can be.'

'Sorry to hear that, Growlson—catarrh broke out, eh?'

'Well, I don't know as they've got it *yet*, sir, but if that new shepherd's allowed to come backards and forrards through my bit of run, my sheep'll soon be that poor that they may get the "guitar," or the scab, or anything else, as only comes from poverty of blood, in my opinion. Then that ration-carrier ain't brought me the right 'bacca, nor the soap as I sent in for more'n a fortnight ago, and there's a lump of bone in my meat; I know that storekeeper's got a down on me, and my yard wants making up, and there's a sheet of bark off the roof of the hut, and I'd be glad if you'd have my account made out, and let me know how I stand, I'm a-thinking of leaving next month, sir, and——'

'Confound it, Growlson, I can't stand here all day

listening to your grumbling. If you want to go, go! but don't come bothering me about it. That new man at the Pine Hut lost his sheep the day before yesterday.'

'Lost his sheep, did he?' asked the shepherd with an air of cheerful interest. 'Well, I thought he seemed a blowin' sort of fool. Was they branded No. 5?'

'Yes,—have you seen any?'

'Well, my leading sheep picked up a few this morning—about a hundred, I should say. Just agoin' to tell you when you stopped me.'

'Round up your flock and let me have a look at them.'

Shepherd (to dog): 'Go round 'em, Balley.'

The obedient collie runs round the head of the flock, which he drives violently back upon the rearward sheep, then rushes behind, driving up the rear rank with great precipitation, and lastly flies round the whole circumference of the flock, jamming them into one terrified and panting mass.

Shepherd: 'Good dog, Balley!'

Hobbie looks keenly through the flock, after which he says—'Well, you have 200 good if you haven't the whole lot. You shepherds never can guess at a small number of sheep. Go into the home station to-morrow and get drafted. Your flock looks well as usual. If you want anything get it at the store.'

Shepherd: 'Oh, I don't want nothin', besides you always charges a pore man so high for everything. Speak to 'em, Balley!'

Hobbie turns, and going quietly back takes it

very easily for the rest of the day. Gilbert, who has heard nothing of the fortunate 'picking up' of the remainder of the lost sheep by Growlson, goes into some 'back country,' where he searches zealously but unsuccessfully the whole day. Finally reaches home very tired and rather cross, long after dark. He is, however, mollified by the good news that the flock is comparatively all right. There are fourteen missing, most of which have been seen dead, and twenty-five bitten more or less badly. Few of these last will survive. The fangs of the dingo strike wolfishly deep; moreover there is a taint of poison, as old shepherds declare, in the wild dog's bite—so disproportionate often is the mortality to the appearance of the wounds.

The lately jeopardised flock is handed over to another shepherd who had opportunely arrived at the travellers' hut the night before. He is a clean-shaved elderly man, of grave and respectable air, followed by two collies evidently of value—as they are provided with the wire muzzle of the period. 'Where were you last?' inquires Hobbie.

'Furlong's Outer-back-Mullāh, been shepherdin' five-and-twenty year come Christmas. Been at Mullāh four, just "knocked down" a cheque for seventy-two pound—worse luck.'

'Then you won't want to get drunk for a year at least,' said Hobbie. 'Had your breakfast?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Got your blankets?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, go up to the yard and I'll come now and

count the sheep to you. Feed them along the track by the edge of the plain till I catch you up. I'll send your rations after you.'

The deposed pastor in the fur cap having had his account made up, is accommodated with a small cheque, and is requested to go and lose somebody else's sheep, but if so to report the affair more quickly. He accordingly departs—giving out 'all down the river' that 'them Elliots' entreated him to stay with the tears in their eyes—couldn't stand the rations—bad flour—post and rail tea—and nothing but old ewe mutton.

CHAPTER II

ALL the day has been consumed in depositing the new shepherd at his station ; also in regulating two other flocks that have taken the opportunity to get 'boxed' or mixed up. So that they have to be brought in and carefully drafted. This little duty being finished, word comes in from the farthest out station — twenty miles back from the river —that, in the opinion of the shepherd who sent the message, something was wrong with old Bill Bolton at the Sandhill Hut ; had seen his sheep all round the hut in the middle of the day—called out, but got no answer ; was obliged to go on, as his (the shepherd's) sheep were 'running on young feed.'

This was the substance of the message—apparently not alarming. To the instructed, however, in the ways of sheep and shepherds the aspect of matters thus disclosed was ominous.

'I don't like the look of things at all,' said Gilbert. 'Old Bill is our best shepherd—never given the least trouble during the five years he has been with us. I can't understand his sheep being at home at mid-day unless the old man was sick—it is a bad sign. He cannot have gone away for a

"spree," as, besides being a straightforward, plucky old fellow, he has a large sum (for a shepherd) at his credit.'

'Something must have happened,' replied Hobbie thoughtfully. 'The night is fine, there will be a moon in two hours; suppose we ride out after dinner? These men rarely grumble when there is real occasion, curious to say, but die and make no sign.'

'The best thing we can do,' assented Gilbert; 'we shall only be worrying ourselves all night, and we may be in time to help the poor old fellow. Here, Flying Mouse! run up *yarraman*—the gray for me — Mr. Hobbie's mare, and you take Curlew for a treat. You put on saddle when that one moon look out 'longa sky; we go long o' Sandhill Hut; that one old man Bill very bad, I believe.'

'Strange life is that of a shepherd,' pursued Gilbert, 'especially in these latter days of economical management. In the old days a hut-keeper was necessary—if only to keep the blacks from robbing the hut, or to report the death of the shepherd when they killed him and took the sheep. One can think of the shepherd as a man not altogether without the minor pleasures, as returning at night he found the mutton chops, the freshly baked damper, and the quart-pot of tea ready on the table. At this season of rest and refreshment, the hut-keeper would walk forth with hair brushed and oiled, his whole get-up denoting study and leisure, to put the flock within the hurdles which, during the day, he had shifted on to fresh sward.'

'Yes,' said Hobbie, who was meditatively appropriating a succession of slices from the ample breast of a wild turkey which Flying Mouse had succeeded in stalking a few days previous, victualling the fortress on the principle of the late Dugald Dalgetty, formerly of Mareschal College. 'Yes! it was not such a bad life, for a man who was old or an outlaw; misanthropical or merely lazy. If he could not fraternise with his hut-keeper he could always fight with him, nearly as pleasant a break in the monotony of his life. It is curious that two people, as wholly dependent on each other's society as if they had been on a raft, generally *did* quarrel, often for weeks, not interchanging a word. I always hated the "hatter" (or solitary shepherd) system, and gave in to the fashion reluctantly, as you know.'

'We must be governed,' answered the more arithmetical brother, 'by the laws of supply and demand. A shepherd who keeps his own hut profits pecuniarily to the amount of ten pounds per annum. He undertakes the work and the Alexander Selkirk life voluntarily; we save two-thirds of the hut-keeper's wages and all his rations.'

'There's a money profit and a trade success, I grant,' retorted the unconvinced Hobbie, 'but I don't like it, as I said before. It's like giving a fellow-creature every facility for becoming a lunatic. I have no doubt of the tendency of the lonely life, the unbroken solitude, the brooding soliloquy of which the shepherd gets the habit, to weaken or destroy the intellect.'

'People lose their brains in many avocations

now,' said Gilbert; 'I don't know whether shepherds are madder than other people.'

'A man must have incipient dementia who adopts the life at all. It's lucky all men don't think alike on these subjects. I think I hear the boy whistling and the horses pawing in the yard—*vamos!*'

Out into the fresh atmosphere of an Australian autumn night. O'er the dark-blue heavens rose nor cloud nor mist: golden-bright gleamed the star-clusters above them. The track was smooth, the red sand grateful to the feet of the horses. Fragrant the air with the aromatic scent of the shrubs through which the bridle-track led. Indescribable and profound the hush in which wood and plain alike were steeped. They saw the white half-Arab mare which the boy rode, flitting ghost-like through the weird woodland; and somewhat of gloom, as of a savour of death, seemed to associate itself with the night, as, each thinking his own thoughts, they rode fast but silently after their unflagging guide.

In an hour they reached a plain at the farther boundary of which was a wooded knoll. The pendulous streamers of the myall, stirred by the night breeze, swayed to and fro with an undertone scarcely audible. Gilbert thought they resembled funereal hangings—pall fringes, so mournful of hue were they.

At this moment the moon lifted her full orb above the dark-blue sky-line, a flood of light bathed the lonely plain, the darksome myall streamers. Far off, amid the sea-like expanse of the mallee (*Eucalyptus dumosa*) rise sombre, sharply defined peaks and ranges—the solitary isles of a far-distant

sea rarely visited save by wandering tribes or scarce less savage outlaws. The scene was strangely solemn, even to gloom, in the weird silence which pervaded all things.

'Road good, plenty moon now,' chirped Mr. Flying Mouse — impervious to all influences save those derived from a rapid computation as to the distance from home and the improbability of supper at the Sandhill hut.

'Quite right, Flibbertigibbet!' said Hobbie, 'twenty miles out and back means forty. Come, Gilbert—' Gilbert responds by sending his snorting gay-going hackney at a hand gallop along the now plainly visible track, exhilarating to travel upon, from the perfection of its condition as a natural road. In less than two hours they reined up at a sandhill rising out of the level park-like country; a few noble pines grew around, towering above the banksias, the luxuriant growth of which bore testimony to the depth of the sand formation and the underlying moisture, one of the marvels of this 'terra caliente.' They rode slowly up the gently ascending track which, indistinct from the constant trampling of the flock, led to the hut where successive shepherds had spent many a lonely year. The building itself was neatly built from pine logs horizontally arranged after the American fashion; the roof was covered with shingles, split from the same valuable tree. An immense balah or forest oak grew immediately before the hut door. As the brothers dismounted, every feature of the lonely outpost was sharply defined in the magical glow of the moonbeams. In the faint night breeze the sombre sad-voiced tree gave forth

the dirge-like sighing moan which the lightest air elicits from its melancholy tribe. The front of the little dwelling had been carefully swept, and no trace of disorder told of lawless violence.

'Me seeum sheep camp 'longa yard,' whispered Flying Mouse, pointing ahead.

'Not mind 'um sheep now,' said Gilbert gently; 'get off, hold 'um horse.'

'How awfully still everything is,' said Hobbie as they entered the hut together. 'I wouldn't have come by myself for the world. Halloa, Bill! is that you, old man? I see you, what is the matter with you?'

'Hush, Hobbie,' said Gilbert, 'I see him too; he would have turned round if he could; he is ill and weak, or *dead*.'

Side by side the brothers walked up to the rude pallet; rude was it, but neither poorly nor scantily covered, on which lay the old shepherd—he whose wild life had been passed on land and sea, an actor on both elements in many a strange adventure.

He lay in an easy posture, with his face slightly turned from them, one arm behind the head, the other stretched out by his side.

'As I feared,' said Gilbert, 'the poor old fellow has gone to his account; I wonder if he was long ill? He was too weak or too proud to leave his sheep; could he have suffered much?'

'My God!' cried Hobbie, 'look here!' and he pointed to the throat of the dead man, in which an awful gash told the tale of reckless despair. 'There lies his razor on his blanket under his hand; he has done the deed deliberately!'

There could be no doubt as to the coolly-arranged suicide. The old man lay stark and stiff, but his rugged features were calm. The death agony had marred not nor convulsed them.

Wondrous in their calmness are often such faces, even after violent death.

Short and passing had been the death pang; the corpse lay motionless as in sleep.

All was over! The brothers gazed long on their dead servant in silence. How desolate seemed the stillness, in which the wailing cry of a night-bird alone sounded sadly, as they stood, at the midnight hour, by the corpse of the suicide.

The little dwelling was scrupulously neat and cleanly, the hearth was swept, the few clothes and personal effects of the old man methodically disposed, the last half-eaten meal, the pannikin of tea, the rude arrangements of the tiny table made from a sheet of bark, all testified to the coolness with which the strange old man had planned to end his days—the darksome days of which he had long said, 'I have no pleasure in them.'

Gilbert, with a sigh, broke the silence—'God have mercy upon his soul! He alone knows how sorely His creature was tried ere he raised his hand against the life he gave——. We can but give him a Christian burial. Let us be doing. You had better go home at once and send the express waggon with a couple of men. Mouse and I will bring on the sheep, until we're met. We must abandon this out-station for a while; we should never get a man to live here till the story was worn down a bit.'

'I should think not,' said Hobbie; 'fancy dooming an unfortunate wretch to sleep here night after night, solitary after solitary days. Here, Mouse, round up that one sheep! you and Mr. Gilbert drive 'em alonga home station——'

'What come 'long ole man Bill?'

'Poor old Bill dead—cut 'um throat,' answered Hobbie.

'Ah! mine thinkit that one ole man die soon! him talk 'longa himself; me seeum cry, go down on knee and pray to de Lord and de Jesus Christ; what for white fellow go bad 'longa cobbra, baal blackfellow likit that——'

'Blackfellow head too thick, like yours. Now, you fetch up sheep; away you go! You keep alonga road——'

'No fear! baal mine loose im road alonga this one place—me too much big one frighten.'

Hobbie thereupon put spurs to his good horse, and long before daylight was back at Wandaroona, where the necessary dispositions were made for the removal and burial of poor old Bill.

Gilbert and the boy drove the flock before them on the homeward road, until met by a mounted shepherd. The flock was then counted through an improvised break, and Gilbert discovered to his great relief that of the 2500 fat wethers none were missing.

'So much for good shepherding,' said he (for the benefit of the fresh functionary). 'These sheep had justice done to them; therefore they came home of themselves, and very likely would have kept on doing so till the wild dogs got at them. It is a miracle they had not done so before we came.'

That afternoon the men returned with the waggon in which was the corpse, with the scanty personal effects of the dead man. A grave had been dug in the little station burying-ground, the site of which had been selected with care. It lay under a rocky hill, which rose abruptly before it. A few pines, having in their cypress-like forms a certain fitness for the place, shaded the mound, where within a neatly paled enclosure rested the ordinary station casualties: A drowned sheep-washer; a horse-breaker taken unawares, and 'smashed' by a savage mustang; a nameless wayfarer who had prolonged his stay at the travellers' hut, 'feeling bad' as he said—on the next day dying and making no sign. Besides these, under a neatly carved headstone, the former owner and pioneer of Wandaroona, whose constitution, impervious to privation, had succumbed to prosperity and whisky. To this unconsecrated but picturesque resting-place was borne the coffin made by the station carpenter, which contained the mortal remains of William Bolton, aged 65, born at North Shields, England, as a lettered inscription told. The station hands, with the exception of his brother shepherds — who under no circumstances whatever could be spared, followed him to the grave and stood silently around while Gilbert read the burial service of the Church of England. Then the grave was filled, the gate locked, and the spot deserted until Death should again claim his 'teind' from the little community.

. . . . . .

Some days after this occurrence, disposition having been made of the usual morning's work and

the agents thereof, certain men whom it was found necessary to send forth, to ride, to drive, to carry rations for messages, to escort and watch travelling sheep, having been despatched accordingly, Gilbert thus delivered himself. He had been walking up and down the verandah puffing, smoking meditatively, in more than usually cogitative fashion.

'Hobbie, like a good fellow, put away that confounded newspaper and listen to me. If you would read less (in a desultory way) and think a little more (connectedly, that is), you would do what you call your mind far greater justice.'

'You don't say so!' replied Hobbie, looking up good-humouredly from the study of a wildly improbable *Tale of Australian Life*, in three parts, which he was gleaning from the back page of the *Wallandra Watchman and Lower Oxley Advertiser*. 'Really now, if you were to smoke a little less, and dig in the garden a little more, you would improve your digestion, strengthen your nerves, and correct that habit which gives your affectionate junior so much uneasiness. And so, drive on, old man. What's the idea?'

'The idea is this, Hobbie—I am weary of this barbarous, expensive, antediluvian system of shepherding. It is a waste of time, of money, of the lives of our fellow-men. I am determined, as far as we are concerned, to make an end of it. Here we stand in the year 1865, with all its modern appliances and labour economies, content to crawl along with a system only suitable to those pre-auriferous days when a man to every thousand sheep was a fixed unalterable necessity. Now we have

strychnine, fencing wire, dams, wells, hot-water soaks, steam engines, spouts—things then undreamed of. Why should we cling to this intolerable obsolete absurdity? Poor old Bill's miserable death has decided me. I have been collecting information and statistics on the matter. We must make an end of the anxiety, expense, and injustice. Let us go in boldly and *fence Wandaroona.*'

CHAPTER III

'HURRAH!' shouted Hobbie, dashing down *Stephen Shelton, or the Adventures of a Gentleman in Australia*, with all his perils, privations, and pitched battles with blacks, bushrangers, and immoral squatters. 'Hurrah! here's the adventure I've been looking for. I'm by your side, most deliberative senior; but have you gone sufficiently into "Cocker"? Won't it cost a heap of money? Won't the dingoes have a grand general go-in at our enfranchised muttons?

> 'He saw the wild dogs beneath the wall
> Feasting, for this was their carnival;
> Growling and gorging on carcass and limb,
> They were too busy to bark at them.

'How a great poet anticipates all life, adventures —even the most improbable! Could he have forecast Australia with her dulness, debts, deserts, dingoes? Won't all the dingoes get boxed? Won't all the lambs die? Won't the *Wallandra Watchman* have this paragraph some fine day:—"New insolvents: Elliot Brothers of Wandaroona; cause of insolvency: costly improvements, commercial agents, and bad seasons"?'

'I have considered that aspect of the question *very* carefully, my dear Hobbie,' commenced the aroused senior, sailing out with his proposition in full majesty into battle line. 'I have calculated the relative expense, and have fully convinced myself that shepherding is costly as well as criminal! Here are the figures! Our run has ten miles of frontage to the river by twenty in depth—two hundred square miles. We depasture at present on it over nineteen thousand sheep; horses and cattle none to speak of; the country is partly river flat, partly plain, with a large proportion of open forest and some thickly timbered but well-grassed ranges. Pine is plentiful on the boundary, log fencing therefore might be cheaply put up across the plains; on one side we must have wire. Consider the labour department. We have at this moment ten shepherds to pay and feed; a ration carrier who does nothing but attend upon them; then Mr. Countemout, who with ourselves is kept hard at it—active fellow as he is—finding lost sheep, verifying the flocks, and acting as first whip to those exasperating shepherds; more than that, the extra attendants at lambing time—my blood boils when I think of the army of incapables that we are obliged to pay, feed, house, and tenderly entreat, during that season of trial. Hutkeepers, motherers—save the mark! a man for the first green mob; another for the second green mob; double shepherds, the flock being halved. Every kind of useless vagrant fattening upon you, and giving himself airs of importance, for doing what a black gin could do much better; whereas turned-out sheep——'

'But you would not surely turn the *ewes* at liberty,' interrupted Hobbie—aghast at this wild departure from all tradition.

'Of course I would. Why not?'

'Why not?' echoed Hobbie. 'Why, who ever heard of such a thing? Will they not all mix up in one immense trampling multitude? I have visions of them moving along excitedly, five thousand strong, with the tender new-born lambs striving to keep up—listening all vainly for the maternal baa among the bleating masses; finally falling and perishing by the wayside in hundreds. The picture is too painful!' Here Hobbie covered his eyes.

'Don't be a goose!' went on Gilbert sternly. 'You are as senseless as an old shepherd, who (I always think) knows less of the nature of the animals he has wasted his life over than any other human being. He believes that a ewe can't suckle her lamb except he and his confounded Balley are in sight to distract the (perhaps) limited intelligence granted by Providence to the female sheep. Why should not a ewe, if not troubled and worried—arrange her maternal duties as well as a heifer? I am certain the sheep will gain in all respects by non-interference, and whatever it costs I am resolved to see how it works.'

'Has anybody else tried the experiment; and with what success?' demanded Hobbie.

'Lots!' asserted Gilbert, regardless of grammar in his enthusiasm. 'Those Victorian fellows have been at it for years—if we may trust the papers; they are rather bumptious, certainly, but if they get

hold of a new idea they don't wait, like an aloe, till a century produces a flower.'

'Hurrah! hear, hear!' called out Hobbie, clapping his hands, 'you're not going in for the House, are you? But who is this riding across the flat?

> 'I know the light gray charger,
> I know the beard of flame,
> So ever rides Jack Bulmer,
> Chief of the whatsy-name.

'I hadn't quite time to polish that last line—bears signs of haste, doesn't it? I'll go and order lunch. Jack is on his way back from Victoria, after selling those store cattle. Doubtless full of new ideas.'

The welcome guest—as indeed any decent friend, acquaintance, or stranger always is in Bushland—rode rapidly up, and flinging his bridle-rein over the garden fence, advanced to the verandah.

He displayed a broad, powerful frame, a determined visage, illumined by bright blue eyes and fringed by an abundant beard, the colour of which had so materially aided Hobbie's audacious parody.

'Well, old fellow!' said the visitor in a big jolly voice, 'how goes it? how do you get on in the wilderness? Lost any sheep lately? had any bush fires? You see I am adapting my conversation to your capacity. Where's that scamp Hobbie?'

'Not far off—went to see if there was any grog in the house directly he saw you coming. Get into that rocking-chair in the shade. Mouse! take Highflyer 'longa stable. What's the news in Melbourne?'

'Opera very good; Club full: some pleasant

Indian fellows there just now; lots of balls, two or three picnics; spent all my money and left at least two hearts and a half behind. It amazes me how you fellows contrive to live in this confounded burning desert!'

'I hear you, you old humbug,' called out Hobbie in a menacing tone, as he entered; 'how refined and repolished we have become after our five weeks in town. But wait till you get back to Indragyra. The mailman said last time he passed that there were two lots of sheep lost and such a bush fire.'

'That be hanged!' said the guest with startling emphasis. 'What the deuce was Holmwood about? What's the use of being bothered with a partner if a man can't be away for a month on business without everything going to the dogs—Partners! Confound all of them, they're——'

'Nearly as bad as shepherds,' interposed Hobbie; 'ask Gilbert about that. Look here, Jack! have a long cool drink after your ride. It's all right—they got the sheep again and put out the fire; luckily it came on to rain. Holmwood was here on Saturday. Yours is the old room; and when you have taken the dust off, lunch is ready.'

That refection over, and the three friends comfortably seated in easy-chairs, to the full comfort of the mid-day pipe, John Bulmer thus delivered himself:

'Precious slow set of fellows you are in this part of the country. Shepherding away as usual?'

'Of course,' answered Hobbie, with a look at Gilbert, who smoked silently; 'what else is one to do?'

'Do?' shouted the energetic guest, throwing

back his broad shoulders and gazing fiercely at his entertainers, till his eyes sparkled—'do? what every man with a grain of sense is going to do; what these Western fellows in Victoria have done years ago—*Fence in your run!* I declare on my honour, as I travelled through their country the other day, to deliver those W.D. cattle I made such a good sale of, I felt ashamed of myself, and of you, and every one in this benighted region.'

'Why, what did you see, Jack, after all?' inquired Hobbie; 'the sheep coming up to be counted by an Arcadian shepherd with a tuneful reed, foot-rotting themselves, or having their boots laced up? There *was* a reformer in those parts, it was said, who ordered two thousand pairs of boots for his sheep one wet winter!'

'Devil take the boots!—it showed energy at any rate. Why, I saw as many sheep in one paddock as you have altogether in this fleabite of a Wandaroona, with *one man* at a pound a week looking after them on a cheap horse, and finding his own saddle.'

'No doubt he wanted a horse,' suggested Hobbie; 'I suppose the sheep looked like hunted devils.'

'Better sheep, better wool, better lambs than we have here, and not a fourth of the expense,' affirmed Mr. Bulmer, slowly and emphatically. 'I suppose you've sense enough to understand that! You've caught the name of the "Merra-Mellum" clip, and the price it reached at home last year? Through that run I passed and saw thousands of full-mouthed ewes which had never been shepherded for a day in their lives.'

'What do you say to that, Hobbie?' at this juncture asked Gilbert, who had so far been enjoying the effective corroboration of his programme supplied by their enthusiastic friend. 'All your prejudices are dashed to the ground now. The fact is, Jack, that I was labouring to convert Hobbie to the new faith in fencing when you hove in sight, and appeared as counsel for the party of progress. But what are you going to do yourself? That's the proof.'

'I have two tons of fencing wire on the road, old fellow; advertisements are in the local papers for contractors and teams. I'm going to turn out twenty thousand ewes to lamb loose! I shall fence a frontage paddock right off the reel, and go on with the rest of the run after shearing.'

'Well done!' responded Hobbie heartily. 'I was only chaffing you and Gilbert as a sort of advocate for the devil, in order to bring out the weak points of the scheme. For there *is* a slight risk, you know. How about dogs and eagles? do they fence *them* in Victoria?'

'There is a dingo in the Melbourne Museum,' defiantly retorted the reformer; 'you would be puzzled to find one anywhere else. What do you suppose strychnine was furnished by Providence for? The poison cart settles that.'

'Do they send out a cartload of strychnine at once?' inquired Hobbie, with an assumption of economical terror. 'Then I give in; only, at a guinea an ounce, a ton would come to £34,840. I've always heard that they were opulent in that colony; but it seems to require capital—it does indeed.'

'You're getting a little "touched," Hobbie. In this infernal climate if a man doesn't take to drinking he goes mad. You want a trip to town, my boy! or else you'll have one to the district hospital. Does he ever talk to himself, Gilbert? That's the way it comes on. Our cook began to soliloquise last summer, and in less than a week awoke me, standing by my bedside, saying: "The Lord had delivered me into his hand. That we had always been good masters, but that we must now permit him to cut our throats, previous to the whole of the station hands starting for the New Jerusalem." I told him I fully agreed with him, but that Holmwood, being the junior partner, must of course be operated upon first. He adopted my suggestion, and as he turned to go to old Bob's room, I muzzled him, and secured the regenerating steel. We had to strap him down and send him to the gaol for medical treatment. So beware, my ingenuous patient.'

'*You* do well to be careful about incipient dementia—it's easily accounted for,' returned Hobbie, with great affectation of candour. 'People say that you and Holmwood are more than half mad as it is; so that of course the least eccentricity will land you over the border. But chaffing apart, how are we to work these ranges at the back? They are full of dogs, every one knows.'

'Well, what then?' replied Bulmer scornfully. 'Wild horses are cheap enough—you can buy them for five shillings apiece—cut them up into chunks and put poison in every bit; send a man out with a cart and some old crawler of a horse; let him

drag a trail and spread the baits everywhere. Any dog crossing the run must get a bait in one place if not in another. Besides strychnine is not a guinea an ounce, not much more than half, wholesale. I have a lot coming up, pure crystal; you can have all you want at cost price. In the summer you can always get a cancered bullock or two from old Duffersleigh at the back. Send the poison man out to stay with him for a week so that he can strew the tracks leading to water with baits, and in a short time you will clear out all the dogs in the country.'

'But the shepherds' dogs?' said Hobbie, bent on extracting every unfavourable fact. 'There will be a general strike if their dogs take the baits; and the fences are only up on paper as yet.'

'Get up wire muzzles, and give each fellow a couple,' replied Bulmer, armed at all points. 'If they are too lazy to use them it is their own look-out. They will soon get tired of losing them and their wits together—and now, boys, you know as much as I do. I'm a fencing man, fixed and inflexible. If Holmwood won't be converted I'll dissolve the partnership. I'll have a "deoch-an-doruis," Hobbie, if you'll send the small savage for Highflyer, and make tracks for Indragyra.'

'Nonsense, it's fifty miles, and three o'clock—you won't get home to-night!'

'Some time before to-morrow morning—I *must* go—the night is fine, and plains the last thirty miles.'

He proved inexorable, and the grand old gray having been brought round, John Bulmer, the

younger, formerly of Beaumanoir, Bucks, now of Indragyra, Lower Oxley, Riverina, departed for a rather extended afternoon ride.

'Just like Jack,' said Gilbert, as the horseman's rapidly receding figure faded away in the mellow distance. 'What a fellow he is to ride late! Just as if he couldn't have stayed the night and made a good start early to-morrow morning.'

'He's a bad starter,' admitted Hobbie, 'but once away it takes something to stop him. River or range, dark night or summer day, plain or forest, on foot or horseback, all things are the same to John Bulmer on the war-path. He is a man of immense energy, only foresight bores him. I always think he is so perfectly certain of getting along somehow, that he disdains to take the precautions weaker men are obliged to use. Don't you think there is a sort of a hint of a natural law in these things?'

'I don't quite follow,' said Gilbert, with a tinge of sarcasm. 'Without underrating Jack's splended physique and utter fearlessness, you do not surely defend a want of calculation, or that power of computing future necessities which is one of our higher faculties?'

'I don't go so far, of course, but I have certainly observed that men who sketch out their programme with scrupulous accuracy, providing for all possible contingencies, are, when unforeseen difficulties confront them, often very helpless. Now, men like our friend Jack, who think of little beforehand, and march all unheeding into misfortunes and obstacles, are wonderfully fertile in resources and almost unconquerable when the

supreme hour of danger arrives. If Jack is too late he can ride all night; if he loses his horse he can walk; if he comes to a river he can swim it; if he loses his way he can find a blackfellow or a stock-rider or a star. He is never too cold or too hot, or hungry or thirsty, or cross or ill at ease, in circumstances where most other people would be suffering from one or the other, or most of these evils together. He will have dinner and a smoke with Haughton down the river, make another start as they are going to bed, knock Holmwood up in the small hours, and be at breakfast after a dip in the creek, as fresh as if he had been in bed, instead of in the saddle all the previous night.'

'So mote it be,' appended Gilbert to this panegyric upon their nearest neighbour, whom a passing drover, sore beset with weak horses and worthless road hands, had once described as 'a very able gentleman, and very friendly.' 'All the same a good look-out and a good reckoning are not to be despised. For want of them the best ship may get among breakers, where strength is useless and courage vain—do you remember King Haco in the maelstrom?

> 'He grasped the wheel with a giant's grasp,
> But were he ten thousand men,
> In vain that moveless wheel might he clasp,
> Earth's millions were nothing then.

'Haco, you see, was a Norse Jack Bulmer, and had been drunk or indifferent to probabilities which eventuated in total loss, possibly in serious complications to the insurance companies of the period.

And now let us desert the abstract for the concrete —I am about to talk sheep, and pour out figures like a Chancellor of the Exchequer. Having definitely made up our minds about the fencing, the sooner we get the contractors on the line the better; the season appears to me to look like a drought, and if we are to have it, the turned-out sheep will fare the best. So up the advertisements go to-night.'

CHAPTER IV

'DIDN'T you say something about calculations, Gilbert? I'm afraid it will amount to something terrifying.'

'I have been working up the expense of a paddock to hold ten thousand ewes for lambing,' answered Gilbert, with the air of a man who has facts and figures, like a hand at whist, ready to play at a moment's notice. 'I have jotted down roughly the ordinary expense of lambing the same number by hand; you will be rather surprised at the comparative outlay. The question stands thus,' he added, producing a sheet of figures neatly arranged in columns: 'we have ten thousand ewes to lamb in May. These sheep are at present kept in five flocks. Let us take their ordinary expense for six months, including the lambing. I put it down on one side. We will reckon the cost of fencing the paddock on the other. And you will be rather startled to see that the amount needed for fencing, which is a permanent improvement and economy, *only slightly exceeds* that of shepherding, which is annual.'

'I can't believe it,' asserted Hobbie; 'you must

have left out something, or added up the Year of Grace in the shepherding column.'

'I challenge you to check my arithmetic. You know of old that I was always pretty accurate; however, look for yourself, here we go.

'ORDINARY STATION EXPENSES FOR THE LAMBING OF TEN THOUSAND EWES (SHEPHERDED)

Five shepherds for six months, wages at £40 per annum	£100
Rations for ditto	50
Five extra shepherds, on halving the flocks, 8 weeks at 20s. per week	40
Rations for ditto	20
Ten brush yards at £5 each	50
Hut-keepers and extra men, three to each half flock (ten half flocks), at £1 per week	240
Rations for 30 men for two months	120
Ration carrier for six months	25
Rations for ditto	10
Extra horses, wear and tear of tools, cartage, etc.	20
Other expenses, bonus to lambers, etc.	15
	£690

'That sounds a lot of money,' remarked Hobbie ruefully. 'I had no idea odds and ends ran up so. What a thing is addition! it's the principal branch of arithmetic in one's bank pass-book, and how it tells there!'

'Not a penny of all this is reproductive,' explained Gilbert. 'That's the worst of it. Next year sees exactly the same necessity for outlay—brush yards, shepherds, motherers, rations, and cheques, all *da capo*.

'Now for fencing, which, once done, like the brook "goes on for ever." What is the first cost? Here we are again. Behold this picture.

'FIRST COST OF FENCING PADDOCK FOR TEN THOUSAND EWES TO LAMB

Six miles of zigzag log fencing at £40 per mile	£240
Three miles five wire fence, pine posts, at £50	150
Three miles zigzag pine log fence at £40	120
Six miles chock and log, back line, at £30 per mile	180
Boundary rider for six months	25
Rations for ditto and poisoner	25
Strychnine, labour, etc.	50
	£790

'The river, of course, is our southern boundary, saving five miles of fencing. What do you think of that, old fellow, only £100 more than your miserable shepherding? Nearly all the money back in six months, and the *fencing to the good!* I had no right either to charge all the poison to the debit of the fencing, as it is an economic benefit to the whole establishment. As to the boundary riding, we shall have so little to do when a few more fences are up that we shall be glad to take the home paddocks ourselves for the sake of exercise. We'll begin to suffer from *ennui*, I foresee, that's the worst of it.'

'There is but one Allah in Salt-bush-land,' confessed Hobbie, 'and the Fencer is his prophet. I give in. I am an apostate from the ancient faith. I am ready to retract and turn Turk. From this moment I am a sworn convert to the new religion of wire plus chock and log.'

'I thought that would convince you as it did me,' said Gilbert. 'I was in great doubt about it when I first made the calculations, and went backwards over the figures, feeling like you that there must be some mistake. They're all right; and now, the first act being over, let us drop the curtain and go in for some mild refreshment.'

The ukase once issued, a new and foreign element was introduced into the routine of station management. Constant interviews were held with sun-browned teamsters who had come to contract for a few miles of log or wire fencing as the case might be. Camps were formed along the boundary lines, while the felling and drawing in of straight-barrelled pine trees warned the shepherds of the ewe flocks that their employment was wearing to its close. Many were the dire forebodings and darksome prophecies uttered by these actors in a drama being played 'positively for the last time,' passing into the limbo of formless inutilities.

'My word! wait till them bloomin' sheep's turned out. Won't the cove see a difference in them this day three months! Why, they'll get as wild as kangaroos, and there won't be a mossel o' flesh on their bones.'

'Why not, old Beard and Billy?'[1] demanded one of the fencers—a shrewd specimen of the new régime. 'I was boundary rider on Ahla Lahwa, a big down-the-river run, where the sheep did middling well with none of you old growlers to bother 'em.'

'Why not?' retorted the shepherd, champion of the dim and glorious past. ''Cos they goes rambling

[1] 'Billy,' a tin camp-kettle carried by shepherds.

and walkin' about all night, 'stead of lyin' down in a good yard and resting of theirselves! Stands to reason they can't do so well as sheep that's minded by a man as knows his work, and as for lambs——'

'Well, lambs?' persevered the new man. 'I've seen eighty-five per cent of lambs marked off forty thousand ewes, and never a dog nor a shepherd nor no other varmint near 'em from March to November. And they *was* lambs, not 'possums.'

'Well, you'll see, you'll see! I believe they'll get out and be boxed[1] along of old Jerry Graball's sheep half the time, and then we'll see who gets the most lambs.'

'Boxed be hanged!' continued the friend of fencing warmly. 'Why, you can't *drive* turned-out sheep through a broken panel in a fence; they'd walk past one for days, or go through and come rushin' back, frightened, to their own ground. You old chaps had better go away back to the Bogan and the Paroo where you're wanted and gets twenty-five shillin' a week—you ain't wanted here no more, unless they chop yer up for baits.'

'You shut up, young fellow!' concluded the justly incensed elder, with dignity. 'You might be glad enough to take a flock yourself some day, for all ye're so jolly now. Go round 'em, Balley; he ain't got no tongue now, with that there cussed muzzle on.'

All this time the poison-cart was kept going well. Bits of horse-flesh, duly death-loaded with strychnine, were scattered profusely in every paddock, along every road or track, by every creek and waterfall,

[1] 'Boxed,' mixed up together.

while dead dingoes here and there testified to the efficacy of the system.

Far different were the results of the old fashion of giving each shepherd the eighth part of an ounce of strychnine, and exhorting him to lay it around his sheep-yard. This, of course, he never did, being far too much concerned for the safety of his own dogs. Besides, as old Jack Lagger openly propounded, 'If there was no blacks nor dingoes the squatters wouldn't want no shepherds.' The wild dog was regarded by the average shepherd as an animal whose existence was by no means an unmixed evil—on the contrary, useful in his generation, as keeping up in the minds of the masters a wholesome regard for that indispensable variety of working man, the 'experienced shepherd.'

It became apparent to the brothers that the sooner the paddock was finished, the sheep turned out, and the shepherds discharged, the better it would be for the great experiment. No labour or cost to this end was spared. To the sole charge and superintendence of Mr. Countemout were delivered the fat wethers, the four-tooth and six-tooth sheep, with the last year's weaners.

These were all shepherded 'at the back,' whither, in consequence, he betook himself, often long before daylight, and did battle ceaselessly with the crimes and misfortunes of the shepherds. He, a man of tireless energy and sleepless watchfulness, was as yet unconverted to the new-light tenets. Perhaps the idea presented itself that in the strange economy of labour rendered possible by fences, not shepherds alone, but even overseers might be discovered to be

superfluous. However that might be, he worked loyally at his post, leaving the losses and crosses so confidently predicted by the 'old hands' to evolve themselves from the sensational future of Wandaroona.

The fencing had been let in several contracts with a view of securing greater speed and efficiency, so that Gilbert and Hobbie were at work from dawn to dark, so organising the commissariat for the various camps that no delay might occur.

The contractors were paid in cash at a certain fixed rate, say from £30 to £50 per mile, they finding the teams, labour, rations, and tools. Strict agreements were made in all cases, wherein the contractors bound themselves to use only certain length and thickness of rails, and to complete the work within a specified time. The proprietors, on their part, agreed to supply meat, flour, tea, and sugar at certain specified prices, the whole amount of such and other stores to be deducted from the gross total due when the work was completed satisfactorily. Work of this nature is chiefly performed by contract. At weekly wages men lack the enthusiasm generated by the encouraging conviction that the harder they work the more money they will make. Much of the despatch necessarily depends upon the working bullocks and horses. Station teams often stray, but it is matter of remark that the teams of contractors, to whom time is money, are rarely missing.

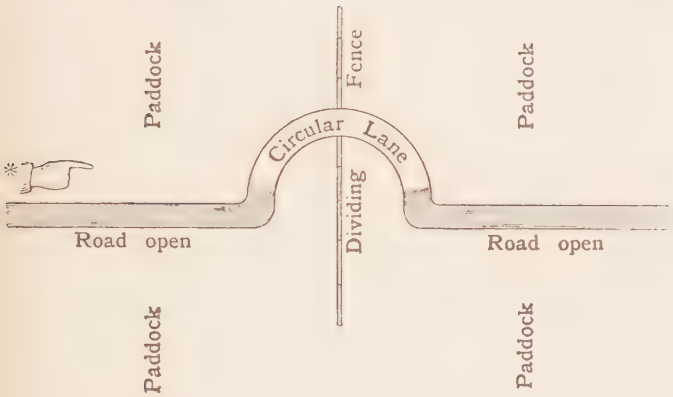
The fencers, therefore, aware that each economy of time would pass to the credit of the ration bill, worked hard, late and early. The contractors were chiefly native-born Australians, small farmers from

the settled districts, who migrated periodically with their teams, to earn what money might be available between seed-time and harvest. They engaged the better portion of the wandering labour of the district, and paid high wages; but working hard themselves, and being judges of the quantity of fencing contained in a good day's work, they compelled their men to keep abreast of them. If unwilling or unable, they were discharged without notice. And harder labour is not performed under the sun, as very literally it may be described. In wire fencing the digging of the post-holes, the splitting of the posts, the wiring and putting up the fences, are generally in sub-contracts. In the scorching summer days, in the long breezeless afternoons, how often have we seen the sun-baked, brow-bathed toiler casting into his task all the unflinching energy which his forefathers had built up in the national type under such widely different climatic conditions.

The zigzag fence, better and cheaper than any, where the Murray River pine (*Frenela verracosa*) can be easily procured, is simple of construction. The logs, cut in lengths of sixteen or eighteen feet, are placed resting by their ends upon each other, at an angle sufficient to secure solidity. A few strokes of the axe form a bed for each log upon the one below. Four logs—the heaviest placed uppermost—will make a barrier which neither sheep nor lambs will jump or penetrate. It is superior to its relation 'the chock and log,' which requires more timber and more labour. The contract for all the zigzag fencing of Wandaroona was taken at £40 per mile—the contractor to find everything. The wire fencing cost

£50 per mile, or even a little more; the first cost and carriage of the wire being paid for by the proprietors.

The season was dry—too dry, indeed—bordering on a drought, but the preceding year had been so prosperous that there was a reserve capital of grass —'old feed,' as the shepherds call it. The grass of the Australian interior retains its nutritive quality even when dried and withered. Like the soil, the



timber, and the animals of 'Australia deserta,' it can dispense with the rainfall for an almost incredibly protracted period. There was plenty of water artificially supplied, so that no delay took place. By the last week of March, therefore, all lines were completed. As a main high-road ran by the river through the whole length of the 'frontage' of the run, as it was called, gates were constructed of easy habit of hinge and latch, so that the traveller, whether careless or irritable, might have no excuse for leaving

them open. In after days, when subdivision came generally into operation, the gradually perfected invention of the semicircular lane superseded gates. These lanes were always open—had no gate, and wanted none. The sheep never dreamed of going through—inasmuch as the entrance, beyond which they could not see, looked like a yard—feeding peacefully past them, as if they had been the park gates of the lord of the manor.

CHAPTER V

'So, Gilbert!' called out Hobbie on Saturday evening, 'we have reached the last week in March, and, praise we the gods! we have ended the fencing. The next month is momentous; are you nervous?'

'Not in the least,' answered his brother, looking up from a book, which he closed and returned to its place on the shelf in a methodical and preparatory way. 'Not in the slightest degree. You know I rode down to Jack Bulmer's last week and stayed a night with him. We went into the subject exhaustively, when he gave me experiences and statistics in a more leisurely mode than when we saw him here.'

'I daresay you two had a stupendous yarn—I can imagine it,—Jack doing the talk, and you the listening and most of the smoking.'

'You have hit upon the proportion,' replied the senior. 'I have an idea I can talk a little myself when I see fit. Only, at the time you mention, I wished to acquire, you may observe, another man's experience.'

'Well! what did you acquire from the impetuous, impressionable Jack?'

'This much: that in the minds of all *thinking* men fencing is a proved success as applied to sheep-farming. The outlay is fully repaid through the increased profits and decreased expenses in two or three years—often in less time. The sheep do *not*, as stated, become wild. They arrange their hours of feeding, watering, and camping so well that all interference is injurious. Finally, the station expenses are wonderfully lessened; the losses are small, and the fleeces materially improved in length, purity, and weight.'

'About the lambs?' demanded Hobbie.

'Well, he admits that the percentage is not so high as in favourable seasons by hand. But when the difference in expense is taken into consideration, as also the fact that only strong lambs are reared, the balance is undoubtedly in favour of the "turned-out" system. Besides, you can lamb any number of ewes in paddocks in any season, and you are wholly independent of labour until shearing approaches.'

'What about the fattening sheep?'

'It is agreed,' explained Gilbert, 'that a single flock of wethers with *a very good* shepherd, and about three times as much run as they require, might probably reach the Melbourne yards more prime in condition than paddocked sheep; but a far larger number, if turned out, could be fattened on the same ground. However,' continued Gilbert, 'Jack Bulmer, with his customary noble disdain of trimming, is going to back his opinions in spite of Holmwood's disapproval by turning out twenty thousand ewes in a week or two.'

'All in one paddock?'

'No, in separate paddocks; he has fenced his frontage and divided it, and next year will further subdivide. But at present he goes in for lambing loose in two big lots.'

'So then on Monday morning?'

'On Monday morning, all being well, we pay off five shepherds; count and turn out the five ewe flocks. The gates are made, and I passed the last few miles of fence last week. We shall have some heavy cheques to pay, but, as I have had the honour of proving to you, most of the money will be returned soon after shearing.'

'So be it,' assented Hobbie; 'I am Brutus and you are Cæsar. We are good for the Rubicon.'

On the fateful Monday morning the five flocks, having been ordered in, arrived at the drafting yard. Each was counted over carefully as received from its respective shepherd, and being found correct, was then and there left to wander at will. Great was the bleating and apparent confusion—two flocks incontinently 'boxed' (or mixed together), the others, having been headed different ways, had the decency to keep apart while within sight.

Then the five discarded Arcadians walked up to the house to receive their cheques, full of dark sayings and moody imaginings, relieved by visions of the imminent holiday, with a 'spree' at the adjacent township, such being invariably the end of all things with them after payment for protracted service.

'Well, Mr. Hobbie,' said one of them as they were awaiting their arithmetical doom, 'I suppose

you'll give a man a job of work at shearing time? We ain't hunted off the place for good and all?'

'Nonsense!' answered Hobbie cheerily, not wishing the experiment to wear the appearance of total obliteration of labour, 'of course you will get work whenever it is going on here. It's only a few months till shearing, when we shall want no end of spare hands. Besides, there will be lots of work to let afterwards—more fencing, dams, and wells at the back. It seems to me we shall want more hands than ever for the next two years.'

'That's all very well, sir,' answered the ex-pastor, ruefully, as one who saw himself 'improved off the face of the earth,' and to whom in the autumnal stage of life there was no comfort in visions of dam-making and well-sinking; 'but all the same, sir, it's very hard on the poor man. Here's you squatters have got all the country to yourselves, as one might say; and if you're allowed by Government to go on like this, you won't want no hands from shearing to shearing, except two or three Jackaroos. I don't see as it's right myself.'

'Pooh, pooh! you'll take to boundary riding, and have a horse of your own and go galloping about like gentlemen. We don't happen to want any one just now, but be sure to call next time you pass. Besides Wandaroona is not all the world. There'll be shepherding till we're both old men. You have a middling cheque, I believe?'

Hobbie was not indisposed to let his reduced retainers down easily; for though he and his brother were, like all straightforward, liberal employers, so popular that no one would have thought of harming

them, yet the proletariat in those parts *had* occasionally accented its remonstrances against the rule of capital by burnings of woolsheds, burnings of fences, and most strange direction of incendiarism, conclusively antipodean—burnings of *wells*. In a dry country each lucifer match contains an invisible 'diablotin' magically ready for evil.

This slight grumbling apart, the shepherds departed contented with a state of temporary solvency, and, as is usual with their class, splendidly indifferent about the morrow. On that morrow, but earlier than usual, the Messrs. Elliot Brothers sallied forth accompanied by Mouse to reconnoitre in a general way, and to do their first boundary riding.

The season of autumn in Australia affords weather which is simply perfect. Cool nights, bracing mornings, and mild Indian-summer-like days, are the rarely broken rule in this charmed time. The day was wondrous fair as they rode across to the river, where the dewy grass glistened, as the sun-rays lighted up the hills, the meadow, the far-stretching plain. A few crows—there are crows everywhere (except in New Zealand) in all seasons of the year, flew softly up and down, cawing in a meditative, non-committal manner. There was evidently no recent robbery or murder on the cards; even they had surrendered themselves to the calm influences of the hour.

'Superb weather, isn't it?' commenced Hobbie. 'I always feel like another man as soon as the autumn sets in—and oh! what a jolly life with two or three trifling drawbacks ours is! Think of our fellow-creatures penned up in offices and banks, while we

are so free—free to ride, to run, to stay at home, or to quit it as we please, "Please the pigs,"—or rather please the sheep, for our boasted liberty availeth nought if anything happens to these preposterously delicate creatures. We ought to see some of them about here, by the way. Yes! there they are, Gilbert, a big mob, too, just turning out to feed, and some still in camp; now for the trial.'

Riding to a point where the creek, an anabranch, probably an ancient channel of the river, made a wide sweep, they saw a large number of sheep which their practised eyes at once decided to be but little short of four thousand; they were mostly feeding peacefully on the fresh herbage, some still lying or standing meditatively as *mouton qui rêve*, on the 'camp' where they had passed the greater part of the night.

'There,' said Gilbert, 'are the two flocks that joined forces just after they were let out. How full and jolly they look! most likely they have been feeding all the earlier part of the night. Now, they are strolling off camp at their leisure, instead of being hurried up by a violent young dog and a cross old shepherd.'

'They certainly appear to have the best of it,' agreed Hobbie, 'but there are some things to be proved yet, such as keeping tame and quiet, going into smaller lots, etc. But I catch myself repeating the usual shepherd's jeremiad; let us go back amongst the timber and pick up the others.'

After taking a look at the ewes, now spreading out over the creek flat or meadow, the brothers turned their horses' heads towards the uplands and

rode briskly through the box-tree forest (*Angophora*) which bordered the alluvial level.

The day wore on; the sun became decidedly warm. The dew had dried upon the crisp herbage which did not entirely conceal the red-brown soil. Birds were not plentiful; still from time to time they heard the harsh saw-like notes of the great black macaw, and marked the crimson bars which adorned his wings and tail. He was engaged in crushing with his tremendous mandibles the hard seed of the balah or forest oak (*Casuarina*). Now a late-returning opossum, a strayed reveller, scuttling up the nearest tree, his life in much jeopardy the while from sticks hurled with accuracy at him by his congener Flying Mouse. Then a cloud speck in the blue cloudless sky told of the great wedge-tailed eagle soaring above them, not wholly uninterested in sick sheep or early lambs. A distant group of 'brumbies' (wild horses) threw up their heads, and with a shrill neigh raced off to 'the back,' apparently the sole denizens of the waste.

'Well,' said Hobbie, 'we have seen no traces of Master Dingo at any rate, I think we have thinned his family circle; and those wretches of eagles too—many of them went down last summer, and we shall get the claws of ever so many more before lambing, I trust. Hallo! fresh tracks "all about," as Mouse says!'

That retainer, whose small faculties were always concentrated upon the business in hand, came swooping down at a gallop, and waving his hand, cried out, 'That one jumbuck, him big one feed here; run him yan away altogether, likit Dead Swamp.'

'All right, Mouse,' said Gilbert, who had been scouting on the other side, 'I believe the tracks do run that way, so let us ride straight for it.'

A strong trail leading due north, made in old days by half-wild cattle and wholly wild horses coming in from the waterless deserts of the 'outer back country' to the river, was then struck, and noting that it was thickly covered with fresh sheep tracks, they pushed on.

The 'Dead Swamp,' as by the shepherds and stock-riders the place had been named, was an extensive tract below the level of its surroundings. From the elevation of its borders and uniform central depression, it had evidently been filled in former floods. The water had evaporated during a succession of dry seasons, and seedling eucalypts having sprung up, the lake basin had become a forest. Such changes are strictly antipodean. Then, as the cycle altered in character, a rainfall of exceptional duration had fallen upon that waste land, filling the long-dry, half-forgotten lake. Eucalypts do not support growth in permanent water. So in that period of protracted irrigation every tree in the lake forest perished. Then another succession of rainless years succeeded. Islanded, as it lay now, amid the pale evergreens of the slopes, this leafless melancholy woodland had a weird aspect. From exposure to light and air, the sward of grass grew thick and sweet. Hence, the locale was a favourite haunt of whatever lawless stock could reach its rarely disturbed pastures. As they crossed the banks which centuries since had faintly felt the wash of the surges rising with every breeze, what time the stone-

weaponed savage roamed around, the boy, sending his beady black eyes far through the distance, gave a yell of triumph, and, dashing his heels into his horse, rode straight and fast through the whitened skeleton timber. Following him for a mile, the brothers came suddenly upon another flock of considerable magnitude, reposing peacefully upon a knoll, where the forefathers of Flying Mouse had roasted shells, roots, and game apparently in tons, judging from the size of the mound, the subsoil of which was chiefly composed of ashes.

'So far well!' said Gilbert, looking cheerfully over the tranquil muttons; 'they don't seem inconsolable for the loss of their pastor. What can look better than they do? About three thousand by their appearance—this is not far from where they used to feed. Don't seem wild yet, do they?'

'Couldn't look more comfortable if they had been in a feather-bed all night,' graciously assented Hobbie. 'How clean they are! full as ticks too. I begin to believe in fencing, I must say. Four and three are seven, we've seen seven thousand now, rather more than less, if I know anything of the look of a flock; now for the odd thirty hundred or so. I think we might as well go to the north-west corner of the fence, run it down easterly, and so home. We shall most likely drop on them that way.'

Leaving the flock (no doubt to the great surprise of the sheep, who from long habit must have concluded that they were 'wanted,' when they saw the horsemen approach) to wander at will, the brothers rode towards the mid-day sun, till they struck the paddock-fence not far from the north-west corner. No

sheep being visible, they drew back just sufficiently far to see the ground between; Hobbie retreated still farther, keeping in sight of Gilbert, while Flying Mouse betook himself swiftly to the outer edge of the scouting parallel. Moving in this order they rode on, until they reached the north-east corner of the fence, seeing nothing living save a score of 'paddymelons' (dwarf kangaroo), bolting out of cover like hares, and always holding up one foreleg as if hurt, and four 'soldiers' or forest kangaroo, with their reddish fur, the colour of the soil they bounded over. Then they turned south and made towards home, still following the line of fence.

'Gilbert!' inquired Hobbie, 'confess, don't you feel just a little anxious? I could have sworn we should have seen them before now. Suppose they found a hole in the fence, and got out last night. By this time they might be twenty miles back, split into as many lots, or boxed with Jerry Graball's sheep. Those shepherds of his would not be sorry to pay us off for setting the fashion of fencing, and ruining the country, as they call it.'

'Suppose they have started for the Gulf of Carpentaria or climbed up a tree,' retorted Gilbert testily. 'There are thirty-six square miles in the paddock—you can't suppose that we are to find all these sheep in an hour or two.'

'Little Bo-peep has lost his sheep,' sang Hobbie, 'that is, temporarily, but he needn't lose his temper also. As you say, there is a good deal of finding in a forty-mile paddock. I thought I heard a yell, though; yes, 'tis the war-whoop of Flibbertigibbet!'

That restless *indigène* had impatiently widened

the gap between himself and his masters, and was not to be seen, but from the far distance came faintly at intervals the shrill clear cry of his race. 'The young rascal has them,' quoth Gilbert, much relieved, though loath to confess it. 'I believe he could see through a flight of steps and a deal door, Sam Weller notwithstanding. This way,' and turning at right angles, they rode at best pace in the direction of the sound. At length they caught sight of the successful wood-elf seated at the foot of a tree, from which he had just extracted a large maternal opossum by the questionably humane process of screwing a stick into her fur, and dragging her from her nest far up in the hollow trunk.

CHAPTER VI

'WHERE jumbuck?' demanded Hobbie; 'you didn't bring us all this way to see a 'possum?'

'Ha, ha!' laughed the imp, puckering up his goblin-like face into a grin of triumph; 'close up me lose 'em. Me see 'um piccaninny track, ground very hard; then two fella sheep come out 'long o' scrub—run back when him see me. I believe big one mob 'longa flat top hill. Me hear 'um.'

'I believe this urchin is a transition type of the Darwinian system,' asserted Gilbert in a leisurely tone, delivering himself over to the fanciful analysis. 'He is a runaway ear evolved in some atomic scramble from the lower human forms. He has been joined by an eye floating unclaimed through space. The remainder of his organisation is entirely subservient to these two senses, and exists only for their physical protection and locomotive needs.'

'Didn't Sydney Smith say Jeffrey's intellect was improperly exposed—that he hadn't enough body to cover it decently? Nothing new (except boots) you see.'

'Why, Hobbie, I begin to believe that you read sometimes—your memory is so good that you might do something if you had any application. Let us

go up the hill and leave Mouse to roast his 'possum. He'll soon overtake us.'

Before them lay an isolated irregular mass of sandstone running transversely for several miles. Its sides were thickly clothed with the forest oak and varieties of the myall, all low growers, having scented wood and leaves which, greedily eaten by stock, are at once palatable and fattening.

Lofty crags and deeply-furrowed ravines denoted the extensive denudation that had taken place. The soil was rich and the grass thick in large patches where the timber had been cleared off by periodical fires. Leading their horses and ascending the range in a leisurely manner, they noticed signs of a large body of sheep, which had evidently been feeding and cropping the bushes at their ease through all the thicker portions of the scrub. 'Behold another of the numerous advantages of fencing; we have always known there was capital feed on the spurs of these hills. Besides the untouched grasses, sheep enjoy nothing more than these young oaks and low-growing aromatic shrubs. Then at the top of the range there is a splendid tract of table-land naturally cleared. I don't believe any flock of ours has been twice a year upon it.'

'Of course not,' answered Hobbie. 'Fancy old Growlson wearing out his boots among the stones, and his breath swearing at Balley one moment for breaking the sheep's legs by doubling them up on this rough ground, and the next moment, directly they began to spread, dogging them together and making sure "he'd lost a wing of them." So here we are at the table-land, and there is the remaining lot

of sheep safe enough. We must give Mouse a farm selection some day or a tail coat, as a slight tribute to his talents. What a glorious view!'

As they remounted their horses on the plateau and gazed over the wide champaign, which lay spread out far as eye could reach in the clear, bright-hued mid-day, less sympathetic hearts had stirred. A land-scape of varied beauty and vast extent! For many a mile the level was unbroken, save for an isolated formation similar to the one on which they stood. Their position gave them a panoramic coign of vantage. On the west stretched immense plains o'er which a faint gray line occasionally denoted the rare myall woodland. Southward a loftier and more densely green forest line marked, in well-defined undulations, the course of the 'river timber.' A lake fringed with dwarf eucalypti lay glistening in the sun-rays a short mile distant, but seeming beneath their feet. To the northward 'all is sea'—a forest sea—an ocean of which the billows are undulating tree-tops, the wavelets branches green of every shape, tossing in the breeze and lifting their leafage on high; of every hue from palest green to darksome cypress. But ever faintly tremulous with a murmurous mono-tone stretching now, as from immemorial ages, un-brokenly to the farthest horizon.

A solitary far-seen monolith broke the sky-line. So rises o'er the ocean rim in the charmed summer seas of the south the verdurous summit of Tahiti or Ovalau.

Over this fair waste, fresh from the hand of God, brooded a solemn stillness—a desolation perfect, yet scarce melancholy. It was the still mid-day

hour. Bird nor beast nor insect sang nor cried nor chirped.

Gilbert drew a long breath. 'It is very beautiful. One always wishes for leisure and congenial appreciation of scenes like this. But *revenons à nos moutons*.'

'There they are,' said Hobbie, 'every mother's child of them!'

'So I suppose,' continued Gilbert, 'yet I feel the afflatus of the Lake school. At this instant I defy the world, the flesh, and the "Dingo," which means the "Devil" as far as sheep-owners are concerned. These lines always come into my head, time and place befitting—

'And here on this delightful day
I cannot choose but think
How oft a vigorous man I lay
Beside yon fountain's brink—
Mine eyes are dim with childish tears,
My heart is idly stirred,
For the same sounds are in mine ears
That in those days I heard.

'Heigho! I suppose we *shall* get old some day; dreadful to think of, isn't it?

'Well, yes,' answered Hobbie cautiously. 'Experience is in favour of the theory. But sheep-owners have an existence so torn by the passions that they can hardly expect to grow calmly old. Now, let us go and look at the adventurous mountaineers before we make tracks for home and a little dinner, by which time we shall not have done a bad day's work.'

Nothing could have surpassed the comfortable, well-to-do aspect of this enterprising remainder of

the liberated flocks. They were full. They were quiet. No torn fleece or bloody stain showed that proceedings under the law of natural selection had commenced. Lying down or indolently cropping the unused herbage, the flock presented a picture of reposeful enjoyment perfect in its degree.

'Too good for this wicked world, quite Arcadian, by Jove!' said Hobbie, after a long admiring review.

'Always excepting the *shepherd* with or without his pipe. *He* could say, with Death, "I too in Arcadia." Surely they enjoy the view?'

'Shouldn't wonder,' graciously returned Hobbie, 'I begin to think everything possible to the awakened intelligence of turned-out sheep.'

. . . . . .

Weeks have passed. The lambing has fairly commenced. Save and excepting the man with the poison cart no one is permitted to go into the sacred paddock. That trusted official moves about deliberately, as befits his responsible duties, with an old horse and an ex-ration cart, from which medical comforts are liberally dispensed. The eagles are gathered together, but they have a bad time of it. They are brought in as return loading by this modern Borgia. Hundreds must have perished, he avers; they lie about in all directions. The crows are fellow-sufferers, although their superior power of digestion saves many. The long howl, so frequent, so unpleasantly suggestive in the cold nights, has become a tradition. Old Bill Jones on his way to the back blocks, seeking employment as a 'lamber,' believes the end of the world to be imminent. 'They'll lay baits for the swagmen and travellers

next,' says he, with grim unsmiling visage, 'and just as well for 'em too, if these here fences is allowed to smother the whole bloomin' country. Ten thousand ewes a-lambin', and never a extra hand. Well! well! Wish I'd never seen the —— country.'

The end of the first week in June. There has been a steady outpouring of prophecies up to the day when the tender sheeplets are due; so soon to fill the air with their bleatings and the pastures with their frolicsome groups. Doubts, fears, and bodings of evil are rife. Mr. Countemout during his long experience had never witnessed a similar experiment. All the sheep successes, known and proved by him, had been due by the ceaseless watch and ward kept by and over shepherds. By main force and ceaseless attention to detail had profits been made and numbers kept up. The elaboration of a plan such as this, which, when finished, was self-acting, had no place among his memories. Not being a man of original mind, he distrusted all but the well-beaten tracks, which he knew by heart. 'The sheep were in large lots still.' He expected they would have broken up more. If the weather came bad, 'a tremendous smash' might take place. There might be only 40 or 50 per cent of lambs instead of the well-known high average of Wandaroona. He thought if they had a few steady men, just to go among the ewes and separate them judiciously or put them together when they wandered from their lambs, it might be as well.

Hobbie, acted upon by these discouraging suggestions, began to waver. Suppose the thing didn't work right all at once. Suppose they lost three or

four thousand lambs. That would be ruinous. 'What do you think, Gilbert? Isn't it a little rash? You hear what Countemout says?'

'Yes, I do hear, and am not in the least degree changed in my opinion! Countemout is a good fellow, but like most men of his occupation, has ceased to use his brains, except on lines which long habit has stereotyped. His great physical energy carries off any tendency to any logical reasoning which he may ever have possessed. I look upon the mental processes of such men—though he is as well born and bred as ourselves—as but a few removes above those of the shepherd. They are also, involuntarily, affected by the fact that this movement is antagonistic to their prestige and interest. Fencing once universal and in prosperous practice, the experienced "overseer" becomes merely advantageous, not as with shepherds indispensable. As I have said for the fiftieth time, how do other men manage? We have borne all the expense. We have made full preparation. We must now stand the shot. I won't hedge a farthing!'

'Hurrah, old boy, stand to your guns! Gentlemen of the Guard, fire first! The battle is about to begin. I own to having felt slightly nervous. But "Richard is himself again!" Let us wait till Tuesday, and then see the first division mobilised.'

Behold the 10th of June! A wild dawn. Red glaring glooms. A rolling cloud rack. Rain had fallen in the night. The temperature was low, the wind high, altogether bordering on severe weather.

'We shall know our fate to-day, Hobbie,' said Gilbert, as they looked at the driving masses of cloud

from the breakfast-table. 'We must take a long ride round, to get a fair idea of our progress or otherwise. It's a week to-day since lambing began. There has been a man *outside* the fence daily, and he reports it as perfectly secure. Joe the poisoner (it has a queer sound, hasn't it? might have exposed him to misconstruction in the Middle Ages) tells me that the eagles are lying dead all over the plains, and except a few tame dogs, which have fallen victims to the absence of muzzles, nothing canine has been noticed since the autumn poisoning round the water. Now we shall see for ourselves.'

Outwardly calm, but somewhat impatient withal, the brothers were soon mounted and inside the first gate. Flying Mouse was left behind as perhaps lacking the high degree of discretion necessary for so highly responsible an errand. No dog of course was permitted to follow; indeed the station kennel had been seriously thinned; only those animals whose owners considered them of sufficient value to be regularly chained and muzzled had escaped old Joe's profuse exhibition of lethal crystals. The day had slightly cleared, though still uncertain, the ground had been somewhat dried by the wind. Rain had, however, fallen heavily in the night. Shallow pools lay over the plains and the creek flat, giving those unsheltered localities a damp and cheerless appearance.

'What a pleasant morning this would have been at an ordinary lambing station,' quoth Gilbert, grimly. 'Can't you fancy the old fellow in charge with three or four half-dead and twice as many wholly dead lambs round a fire? The other hum-

bugs pottering about, each with an armful of callow, crying lambs, and their mystified mothers following. Half a dozen truant ewes, naturally sick of the whole matter, imprisoned each in a hurdled cell ; the muddy yard, the instant demand for more rations, better meat, a rise in wages, and the dismissal of the ration carrier ; a complaint about the shepherd, sure to be at feud with everybody, and accused of playing the deuce with the flock ; the affair ending with general pacification by submission of employer, till lambing was over ; he naturally not caring to offend persons who had power of life and death over his increase. Multiply this arrangement by ten, and judge of what we have escaped!'

'If the experiment turns out well, I will consider everything. But now, Gilbert, let us ride, for I don't see a sheep on the open country where I should have remained had I been one.'

'"If ye had been a sheep ye wad ha' had mair sense," as the old Scottish shepherd told the Duke. Now, I think it would have occurred to me, as a sheep at large and therefore capable of reasoning, that hills and the timber thereon were created for shelter, so now let us make for the hillside.'

When they reached the timbered slope that bordered the range, the ceaseless cries of hundreds of woolly infants testified that they were on the actual arena wherein the melodrama of the Great Experiment was then and there being enacted. 'Now for it, Hobbie! I see no end of ewes and lambs lying about, and sheep in all directions on the hillside. They have evidently drawn up here for shelter, and having arranged themselves satisfactorily, well away

from the wind and the damp lowlands, are in no great hurry to quit.'

Slowly and cautiously did they thread the ovine groups. 'Thick as leaves in Vallombrosa' were knots and clusters of lambs, from a weakling of a few hours, bleating piteously and staggering wildly, to the well-mothered frisking lamb over whose head a whole week had passed benignantly. Hither and thither passed the maternal sheep, occasionally feeding and anon returning, each one recognising wondrously her identical unit, even when helplessly mingled with the clamorous crowd.

Hobbie scrutinised the assemblage with a severely practical eye, looking in vain, however, for any sign of the confusion and sundering of ewes from the feeble offspring which all experienced critics had foretold.

'Well,' he said at length, 'I can't see any damage. Everything looks as well as we could wish. I haven't noticed a motherless lamb anywhere. The "strong mobs" are by themselves and the very young and weak ones are in separate divisions, self arranged. All the howling about general loss and unutterable confusion seems unjustified. Nothing could be more nicely managed, and by the sheep themselves, better than an army of 'motherers' could do it. My doubts are over.'

'Well, it *is* gratifying—it repays one for some thought and anxiety,' answered Gilbert, his face lighting up with subdued triumph.

'I daresay a good bark from the redoubtable Balley would change the face of matters, and an experienced shepherd would have a good percentage

of killed, wounded, and missing by sundown. Thank heaven! their day is over at Wandaroona. Ha! look at that ruffian of an eagle sitting so close, "regardant," as the heraldry people have it.'

'He is more likely to be couchant directly'—laughed Hobbie. 'To me he looks unnaturally solemn; something has disagreed with him. See! his mate lies dead yonder; he has taken a bait, for a pound!'

CHAPTER VII

As they charged the monarch of the air, he rose slowly, and spreading his enormous wings and wedge-shaped tail, essayed to soar. But the sweeping fans moved feebly. Mortal sickness was fast paralysing the pinions that had floated through endless azure in long summer days, or whirled with fierce joy amid the eddying thunder-gusts. Slowly he descended to earth, where, though facing his foes royally to the last, the *hautes œuvres* of the law were not to be evaded; the *lammergeier* soon lay lifeless near his mate.

'Sic semper tyrannis,' quoth Gilbert gratefully. 'The market will be indifferently supplied with eagles next year, I should say. It is evident that if we destroy their natural enemies and provide effectual fences, the sheep may be safely trusted to manage their own parturition. Dame Nature is apt to be trustworthy. Watch that single ewe, for instance! She is a good way from the flock, yet she feeds but a few yards from her tiny lamb, lying snugly under that bush, and goes back from time to time to assure herself of his safety. How she stamps her foot as we approach, and falls back prepared to

do battle! We know by her earmark that it is her first lamb. Does she look as if she is likely to desert it?'

'I stand reproved! No argument, sir!—as old Jackie Down used to say, "Seeing is believing." Now let us skirt all these delightful clever creatures, and take a look at the head of the flock.' Making a circuit, and riding so as to avoid awakening apprehension in the mixed multitude that they were about to be 'put together,' they reached the main leading portion of the shepherdless flock. These were feeding peacefully, looking in fine condition, having improved much in this respect since their liberation. Very few lambs were in this division. What there were had evidently been amongst the first born, and drew forth compliments as to their growth and general appearance.

'Couldn't be better, could *not* be better,' affirmed Hobbie, with tremendous emphasis. 'Nothing is needed now but for us to take it in turns to ride through the paddocks. A dog *might* turn up, you know? But what a jolly thing to think of, that blow high, blow low, with ten thousand lambing sheep, we have not an earthly thing to do, *or a single man to pay* till the time comes for taking off their tails. By the way, that will not be so easy to manage, as we must get it all over in one day or two at the furthest.'

'Of course,' assented Gilbert, 'the yarding of 18,000 sheep, great and small, which I hope our number of ewes and lambs will then reach, is a sort of battle of Waterloo affair. It is to be done, however, and—for the present—lunch.'

June and part of July have fleeted by since the first lambs of the season made their appearance in the world of Wandaroona. During this period, a strict supervision has been maintained of all things connected with their safety. The proprietors have taken it in turns to ride through the paddock. The outside of the same has been carefully watched. None but prosperous indications have been observed. The lambing, with all anxieties about weather and conjectures as to percentage, is past and over. It but remains to arrange the yards for the transaction of the first act of sheep-farming as applied to the increase, and for the verification of the exact number thereof. For a week past, great preparations have been made for the capture and amputation of the unconscious 'tail-bearers.' It seems odd that the intentions of Nature, and the opinions of sheep-owners should be so diametrically opposed in the matter of tails. The former high controlling power has furnished all manner of sheep, including the merino, with reasonably long ones. All persons having authoritative management of Australian sheep believe that the elongated caudal appendage conduces to untidiness and unprofitableness. Hence the edict of amputation goes forth—and millions of innocents are 'docked' annually. This universal practice affords a cheap and accurate method of enumeration. The process of reasoning, by which it may be inferred that every newly-severed tail represents a lamb, from which it has in all probability been reft by force and bloodshed, is within the reach of the humblest intelligence.

A large brush yard, formerly used under the old

régime as a lambing station, after being topped up and added to, was fixed upon as the operating theatre. Happily the sheep had been accustomed, while at large, to 'collect' here as a central position, and had used it for camping purposes. On three sides was a far-stretching plain; an abrupt stony hill at the back with a thinly timbered forest made up the surroundings. Lines of provisional fencing were now put up, in order to act as 'wings,' extending far into the plain. The extremities of these were a considerable distance apart. All arrangements had been carefully carried out before the time of muster was fixed.

'My idea,' said Gilbert, as the time drew near, 'is to have a crowd of hands and get it all over in one day. We are now taking on men for the shearing, and giving them free rations until we start, so we shall have lots of fellows on hand for whom it is always difficult to find work. They will go at it like niggers, or rather like Britons, and we shall do it in a day.'

'We *must* do it in one day,' persisted Gilbert, 'because we can't draft the ewes and lambs, and it is vitally necessary to turn out all the lambs and get them mothered as soon as they are "tailed." It's a fine open place where they will be able to see one another well, and make their "mothering" arrangements as accurately as the unavoidable fuss will admit. We can try, at any rate, but it will push us hard. The confusion will be terrific; some of the lambs are sure to lose their mothers permanently, and the driving in will be no joke. The strong lambs that have never been rounded up by a dog

will gallop like scrub colts. I suppose one mustn't hint at a dog?'

'Not half a one,' earnestly returned Gilbert; 'with care and giving them plenty of time, we shall manage, I daresay.'

The dreadful day of trial arrived at length. All the expectant shearers and hangers-on who have been gathering for various work at the wool-shed for the last fortnight are paraded, and a certain number mounted. Breakfast, as on all great occasions—battles, executions, duels, etc.—is a truly early ceremonial. Thus, ere the sun rises golden clear over diamond-glistening woods in the dew of an early spring morning, all the horsemen are in the saddle. They are divided into four troops led by the two brothers, Mr. Countemout, and lastly the redoubtable Flying Mouse, who, enveloped in a red shirt several sizes too large for him, mounted on Curlew, and bearing a big stockwhip, is in the highest state of pride and satisfaction. Several of the men carry whips, a certain amount of noise and intimidation being necessary for the driving.

The general order is to go round the *outside* of the paddock, cracking their stockwhips from time to time, so as to start all the lots of sheep towards the centre; when gathered, to drive *very* quietly to the 'pretty plain,' as the ancient shepherds had christened the locality of the mustering-yard. The different lots of sheep, in high health and condition, are rather nimble on their feet at first, but are soon seen converging in long lines and widespread array. They run and skip at the outset; then attempt to halt, when there is the usual turning hither and

thither—a tremendous chorus of bleating lambs, and the aimless fussy journey backward and forward of ewes in wildest anxiety, which makes them (except milch cows with very young calves) the most difficult, exasperating, and saint-provoking animals to drive that ever tried the temper of man.

Now they come slowly forward in one vast mixed-up mass; a new danger peculiar to paddocked sheep arises. Great troops of the older lambs, mad with frolic spirits, separating themselves from the main army, gallop away like antelopes. They sweep off, wheeling and darting like birds, from the main body, and sometimes head back with instinctive obstinacy straight for the particular corner of the paddock in which they were born. Some of the younger members of the party turn to gallop after these flying squadrons, which are apparently bent on deserting the army at all hazards. An elderly knock-about-man observes sardonically, 'That all comes along of havin' never seen a dorg; a good sheep dorg, now, he'd soon round 'em up, my word!'

'Very likely,' returns Gilbert, who catches the criticism, 'and the very first bark would frighten the very lives out of these strong lambs, which would break and scatter so that we should lose half of them. Hold hard,' he shouted in a tone of command which at once arrested the eager youngsters. 'No galloping, sit still on your horses, and they will come in of their own accord when they see no one following them. Nothing but time and patience will do any good with these fellows.'

This prudent order being followed, the juvenile

battalions come quietly back to greet their anxious mothers, who in long stringing-out files were permitted to join them. Following these matrons they were merged in the great sheep ocean until a similar outbreak, similarly treated, takes place.

By dint of the utmost patience and strict avoidance of unnecessary noise the great ovine mass is moved and hustled up to the wings. Once between them the battle is won, and the gates of the large yard soon close behind them.

By the time this first success—not inconsiderable—is accomplished, the day is nearly done. There is abundance of grass and water in the moderate-sized paddock, called the receiving-yard. A night's confinement in such quarters not involving privation, it is decided to leave them there. The outlets are carefully closed, and everything left in order for the morrow's deeds of blood.

'Wonder what percentage we shall have?' queried Hobbie; 'not very low, by the look of the mob; splendid strong lambs they are, too, not a waster or a weak one amongst them.'

'We have seen very few dead lambs,' answered Gilbert. 'They have all the advantages of savage life, only strong ones survive. There is little profit in saving the life of a weakling. He never comes to anything. I am rather sanguine as to the result.'

'At any rate, they will not have cost much, that is one comfort,' said Hobbie. 'Do you remember the cheques we used to draw at this season? Lamber so much—lamber—lamber—it was nearly as bad as shearing time.'

The mustering party stands steady at the yards

as the sun upheaves a crimson disc o'er the green billows of the sylvan sea into a pearly sky. At this comparatively early hour all have breakfasted, dressed, smoked, and are ready for a 'big day's work.' The sheep are safe and serenely comfortable. From the spring cart are drawn shirts and trousers of such antiquity as render damage difficult and deterioration impossible. These are donned by the leading operators. A long lane has been filled with sheep and lambs. From these, smaller yards are packed closely. Outside stand ten men, including the brothers and Mr. Countemout, armed with sharp knives. Twenty others—two to each operator—are told off, who at once jump in, and seizing each a victim, 'unconscious of their doom,' hold it breast high to the executive.

'The tip off near ear,' shouts Gilbert, 'for the ewe lambs; off ear for the others—tails rather short.'

As he spoke the tender pink skin of the lamb's ear is divided like paper, and the astonished little creature dropped upon the grass, its tail being simultaneously severed by a sharp wooden-hafted knife. Almost at the moment, nine other miniature sheep are deftly cropped, docked, and tumbled bleating beside them, just in time to keep them company. The work is ceaseless after this for half an hour, when the subdivision was cleared of lambs, only the ewes remaining. The Elliots, Mr. Countemout, and the others are by this time covered, as to face, neck, and shoulders, with the blood which had spurted from the ears and tails of the wounded. Now appears the value of the aged garments. The ewes of the lamb-emptied small yard are then carefully counted out

and duly entered in a notebook. As the last sheep goes out, the catching-yard is refilled, and the 'cutting and wounding, without the statutory intent to do grievous bodily harm' recommences. The tails as severed are thrown into heaps, close to the feet of the performers. Still as the day wears on, the same process of yarding up, catching, and cropping proceeds with unslackened speed. Higher and higher grow the mounds of tails; larger the released body of sheep on the plain outside. Many of the lambs at once find their mothers, who, after one glance at their altered appearance, march off into the less dangerous interior of the paddock. Others, not so fortunate—ewes whose lambs are yet in the yard, and lambs whose mothers are not released—remain bleating around the enclosure. Small time is given for the mid-day meal. A crust of 'damper,' a glass of grog, a cup of tea, and at it again. The calculation is tolerably close. As the sun dips behind the range, the last yard of ewes is counted out, and the great operation is over.

'Far from a bad day's work,' quoth Gilbert, with a grateful sigh. 'I feel (and probably look) "a man of blood" all over.

> 'They were weary at eve when they ceased to slay,
> Like reapers whose task is done.

'Give the men another tot. They've worked like bricks; catch the horses, some of you, while we count the tails. Just enough light.'

Every one upon this, whose education had not been neglected, commences to sort the small mountains of tails into heaps of one hundred each. These

are placed in rows, clearly and separately, for Gilbert to make a final computation thereof. All told, there are eighty-seven of them, and nearly half a one over, which contains forty-three. 'Hurrah!' sang out Hobbie, after checking Gilbert's count. 'Eight thousand seven hundred and forty-three lambs. Eighty-seven per cent, and a fraction. Who dares to say a word against fencing now? The battle is won, and now, "all tails being told," give me the reins, and jump in, you fellows!'

The next day being conscientiously devoted to doing nothing, there was leisure for discussion.

'I can hardly realise now,' said Hobbie, 'that matters have turned out so splendidly. Here is lambing well over, a famous percentage of strong lambs which nothing can hurt; what is better, we have not an extra man or meal to pay for till their jackets are off; even after that we can wean for nothing by simply drafting and removing the ewes, and leaving the lambs inside. Being where they have been born and bred, of course they will settle down more easily.'

'It is wonderful, when one sees the result,' agreed Gilbert, blandly philosophising. 'Strange that so few people, comparatively speaking, should have had enterprise sufficient for such an obvious improvement. It only demonstrates the slow growth of the idea.'

'Slow indeed!' assented Hobbie. 'I don't wonder at Jack Bulmer's vehemence. It must seem so intensely thick-headed of us all, to a man who has seen the advantages of fencing proved.'

'Fancy our state of Egyptian bondage to the

lambing stations we should have had, if all these ewes and lambs had had to be shepherded; how *did* we ever endure the drudgery, anxiety, and expense of the old system!

'We shall have a pull, too, at shearing time,' pursued Gilbert, 'along of the fencing; we can shear all the "dry sheep" first, and have them back at their yards, before we commence at the ewes and lambs, which will be in clover all the time. We ought to make up our minds, then, about fencing the rest of the run.'

'I should say so,' returned Hobbie with enthusiasm. 'We'll have every sheep in thin fences, wire, zigzag, and chock-and-log, before next shearing after this. Then, life will be worth having. When I think that those praiseworthy ewes had "mothered" all their offspring, and were out of sight of the yard this morning at sunrise, when Countemout passed in from Burnt Hut Station, and that we need not go near them for a week, I could almost weep with the overflow of real unadulterated happiness. The golden age has revisited the earth. We must change the name of the place from Wandaroona to Arcadia.

'Round Arcady's oak, its green
The Bromian ivy weaves,
But no more is the satyr seen
Laughing out from the glossy leaves.

'Heigho! I wonder if we shall ever see the classic land, or whether we are, like the 'possums, doomed to gum-leaves for ever?'

CHAPTER VIII

LAMBING is, after all, chiefly an affair of outposts. There is a large infusion of guerilla warfare; but shearing is the real campaign, when the entire military force of the kingdom is displayed; when the reserves are called out to the last man. This 'protomachia,' with its sallies and repulses—its anxiety and triumph—its feverish energy and reactionary repose, has come to an end. The men are paid off, the huts are empty—the wool-teams are gone, the heat increases, the travellers decrease. All the land seems settling down into a torrid, lotus-eating stage, when everybody is too hot to do anything, and labour of every sort has become extinct by process of desiccation. At this season in the 'Terra Caliente,' even Riverina, as day by day the sun plants his flaming banner in the face of shrinking nature, so the water disappears, the flowers fade, the grass shrivels, breaks off, and is blown away into infinite space by the fiery breath of the desert wind. A great horror of dulness and lassitude settles upon all things. By reason thereof the dogs will scarcely bark, the shepherds have barely sufficient vitality to cut up tobacco, the sheep decline the recreation, at once so easy and so

pleasantly wrong, of getting lost. With the thermometer one hundred and ten in the shade, the millennium of the 'dead certain' sets in. There has been a slight ripple in the breezeless calm, owing to the sinister influence of *grass-seed!* This does not sound very dreadful. It rather has a tone of nature's luxuriance, lush herbage, waving meadows, and all the rest of it. It *does* wave, my malison upon it! Of all the permitted diabolism with which the Enemy is suffered to torment man and his poor relations, the animals, this corkscrew member of the Gramineæ, *Anthistiria infernalis*, is the deadliest. Barbed, involuted, needle-pointed, the tiny javelin, which ought to be a grass seed, is in summer hardened to the temper of steel. Borne by the wind, or falling ripe from its stalk, it matters not which, it is launched forth and buried in the sides of the innocent lambs. 'The pity of it!' Up to a certain age, say six months, a man may have ten thousand—twenty thousand lambs which are 'a sight to see,'—plump, strong, splendidly developed, looking nearly as big as their mothers; in value so many half-sovereigns walking on four legs. The sun flames, the grass ripens, the waving prairies upon the slopes and the long levels of the angophora woods have a pallid appearance, dismal and uncanny in the eyes of Mr. Countemout and the elderly shepherds. Let the bounding, vigorous lambkins but *once* gambol through this fatal field, and they come forth pierced through their tender pink skins in a hundred places with the barbed arrow-heads, stricken nigh unto death.

Fancy! my favourite friend, who thinkest lightly

of the sorrows of the 'lower classes,' brute or human, what *thy* sufferings would be if a howitzer suddenly discharged at thee a thousand tiny barblets, striking deep into every skin crevice and by a kind of natural rifling action tending to bite more and more deeply with each movement into the agonised flesh. Think, too, if thou hadst no hands, no tweezers, no speech, no friends, nought but dumb agony, and an occasional spasmodic kick for relief! Riddled and pierced through every pore have I seen lambs and young sheep. Through skin and the underlying muscles and nerves went the steel-pointed tiny needle. The helpless victim pines, lies down, wastes, weakened and worn to death with agonised endurance; it refuses food. Then the friendly crow picks out its eyes as it lies gasping on the sward, afraid to move and so provoke the intolerable agony of locomotion. The remainder of the flock struggle through the period and eventually arrive at maturity. They tell up in a count, and if the station is sold are as others. But 'they never make sheep,' and are always referred to by Mr. Countemout and other disciplinarians as those confounded undersized wretches of the year 187– that were regularly ruined by grass seed, have grown up stunted and bad constitutioned, will never be worth a curse the longest day they live. Great pity they were not all knocked on the head directly they opened their eyes.

This was the sort of thing our young friends found imminent.

Fortunately for them between the anabranch and the river there was a splendid green grass meadow averaging two miles in width.

'I *did* think of a run to Sydney for a month,' quoth Gilbert plaintively, 'but now this confounded grass seed is so bad, I shall defer it. Bush fires will be in season when the first difficulty is disposed of. Nature is the unkindest step-mother to squatters!'

'We must humour the ancient dame till she sends us a wet season,' answered Hobbie. 'That is our only chance for a holiday; and then we might have two thousand ewes and lambs drowned like Athelstane's in the great flood.'

'Served him right,' said Gilbert ruthlessly. 'He was as unready as his namesake in *Ivanhoe* and took no precautions when he saw the anabranch filling up before his eyes. Now what precautions are *we* going to take? We mustn't lose all these fine lambs now that we have them.'

'Well,' returned Hobbie, 'the flat between the anabranch creek and the river is all clover and meadow-grass together. Except on the small sand-hill there is not an acre of corkscrew grass in the lot. The creek is high; if we swim the lambs over and brush-fence one or two of the shallow places, they will be safe, sound, and literally "in clover" for the next three months. By that time all the wire-grass seed will have been shed.'

'First-rate idea!' assented Gilbert. 'We must get them all in and draft off the ewes; the lambs will then be weaned and out of harm's way at one and the same time.'

This project was duly carried through with the full concurrence and assistance of Mr. Countemout. The weaners were drafted out, and being taken to a

yard at a narrow part of the creek, a rope stretched across as a guide, were after considerable intimidation and coercion forced over. Sheep, especially when young, are nearly as unwilling as cats to wet their feet. There was no likelihood of their volunteering to swim back. So they roamed unattended over the great river meadows till the autumn, enjoying abundant food and water with perfect immunity from the graminaceous scourge.

. . . . . .

'I don't like the look of the weather,' said Mr. Countemout, apropos of nothing, one evening as they were all sitting smoking in the verandah.

'What's the matter with it?' said Gilbert, looking up at the starry heaven of a cloudless autumn night, 'seems fine enough now.'

'A deal too fine,' returned the experienced resident. 'It has threatened rain at times lately and there have been a good many clouds, but no rain—no rain—that's what I look at. I could swear that the winter was setting in dry.'

'You don't say so?' asked Gilbert with some anxiety. 'To me there is nothing uncommon in the appearance of clouds and the absence of rain.'

'I've been watching the signs of the season,' continued Countemout, with a grave and earnest expression upon his darkly-bronzed features, 'and everything tells the same tale. I hear that the stock are moving in from the back all through the lower country. I saw an ibis to-day, too. My belief is that we are on the edge of a *drought*.'

'God forbid!' ejaculated Hobbie.

At the ominous word the brothers were obviously

moved. In the land in which they lived it was a sound of dread, an image of desolation, which few stock-owners who had lived a decade in Riverina recalled without alarm. In the great plains of the interior, even in the more temperate regions of Australia, the awful spectre of drought had appeared at uncertain intervals in the history of the land. Before its gradual approach and deathlike presence verdure flies the earth. The streams and springs disappear. The stock which have multiplied in happier seasons pine and die from sheer starvation, or in the distant scantily-watered solitudes from which their owners have not had the foresight to drive them before the last water is exhausted, perish *in thousands*, maddened by the torture of thirst. The labour of years is rendered fruitless in a single season. The unlucky squatter, overtaken and distracted, finds the small portion of his stock which has escaped the famine utterly unsaleable. Even at the lowest prices men are unwilling to purchase, having but scanty pastures for their own attenuated flocks and herds. If he be free from debt he may bear the loss, trusting to make a fresh beginning with the remnant of his stock; if he has been erecting 'improvements' on credit, however well considered and certain to pay eventually, or if he have engagements to meet dependent on the sale of stock, he is a ruined man.

Such, or similar, ideas passed through the minds of the proprietors of Wandaroona as Mr. Countemout delivered himself of his prediction. They knew that he had lived for many years in the neighbourhood and had passed through the ordeal of such

visitations. Of his general sagacity and powers of observation they entertained no doubt. Therefore the danger loomed sufficiently near to be confronted. Hobbie was the first to speak.

'It *will* be awfully mortifying, after all our expense and successful carrying out of the great fencing idea, if we have to retrace our steps, advertise for shepherds, and travel the sheep to the mountains, which is the obvious course, if Countemout is dismally right—and I'm afraid he is!'

'I am not so sure of that,' answered Gilbert, who had been smoking savagely and corrugating his brow, as if with unusual mental effort. 'I am not sure but that the fencing will stand to us in our extremity; and we may have another pæan to sing in praise of it. We have not as yet fully stocked the run. We have a large part of the back country fenced. We have one good well, twenty miles back, which will water ten thousand sheep. I vote for completing the fencing, putting down another well, and standing the shot!'

'We shall certainly save the expense, trouble, and partial loss of travelling. My "blood runs cold,"' pathetically continued Hobbie, 'at the bare idea of fresh shepherds, dogs, carts, rations, billies, tents, brush-yards, reporters, hobbles, bells, and all the antiquated nuisances I fondly hoped we had got rid of for ever. We have lots of rough feed in those scrubby ranges at the back; with one more well and a few more miles of fencing, I believe we could weather it out. I am for trying; what do you say, Countemout?'

That veteran removed a richly-coloured pipe

from his lips, and thoughtfully made answer, 'I am not sure but what Gilbert is right, and considering that the feed just now is very fair, and that there is plenty of three-year-old grass at the back that a well would bring into play, we might see it out without unreasonable loss. But there's this to be looked at —if we start from here, say next month, we can make the mountains, with thirty thousand sheep, in five weeks and have first-rate quarters on the road. On the other hand, if we stand by the run with all the stock, get the sheep regularly down in condition, and find at the worst of the drought that we can't hold on longer, why then——' and he gave a puff at the darkly red meerschaum, which sent the clouds of strong 'negro-head' towards the ceiling, causing them to fold and swim like the vapour of a locomotive.

'Why then, we can travel when we can do nothing else,' continued Hobbie.

'By that time,' solemnly made answer the old bushman, 'the road between Wandaroona and the mountains will be like a stockyard, there will be no more grass upon it than upon the floor of this room. The sheep will be so weak that they could hardly bear the journey, even if there was feed; only one thing can happen, if the rain keeps off when you get to that stage.'

'And that is?' inquired Gilbert, who had been following the speaker with deep attention.

'That you will see every sheep you have in the world die before your eyes, without the ghost of a chance of saving anything but their skins. A sorry sight it is. And I, John Cumnor Countemout, have

seen it happen, ay, and to *my own sheep too.* I wasn't always a super ; I started with a tidy little capital, when I first came to Australia, and I lost nine thousand sheep, to the last tally, within six months.'

'What, from drought, old fellow?' asked Hobbie sympathetically ; 'why, you never told us that.'

'No ; from catarrh. I was left with two horses and as many suits of clothes, when all was paid. It's an old story ; there is a bit of bad luck now and then, or I shouldn't be here on £200 a year. All the same I couldn't be in a better place. But I've seen five thousand fat wethers, splendid sheep too, die of thirst on a back block. The owner nearly went mad at the same time. But I think we've had enough of these old stories for one night. I've got to be at Long Ridge at sunrise. Good-night.'

The grizzled, stout-hearted, iron-sinewed pioneer drained his glass of grog and strode off to bed —leaving to our friends considerable material for thought.

'Poor old Countemout has had hard luck, as it would seem,' said Hobbie after a rather long interval of smoking, during which they gazed silently at the dark-blue starry heavens. 'The race is not always to the swift, truly, or he would have been named in the running. He is strong, shrewd, economical, upright in all his ways, and close on fifty years old—his working life nearly told out, and a couple of hacks, three brood mares, and a ten-pound note or two are his sole possessions.'

'There's apparently an ingredient of what we are content to call "luck" in the affairs of life,' said Gilbert. 'I fancy it has been remarked before.

When one sees some of our neighbours, who are neither clever, strong, nor even particularly honest, in possession of famous country, that even their gross mismanagement cannot render unprofitable, the riddle of life does seem difficult to unravel.'

'We shall find the difficulty increased,' quoth Hobbie, returning to the concrete, 'when this drought in all its glory, is upon us. What *are* we to do? According to Countemout, Riverina is about to be like a pastoral edition of Campbell's "Last Man," the last squatter will boil down the last sheep, and gracefully subside amid a grand concluding conflagration—

'The Sun's eye had a sickly glare.
The grass with drought was wan,
The skeletons of stations were
Around that lonely man—
Some had expired of fright—the "brands"
Still rusted in their bony hands;
Of scab and foot-rot some,
The woolsheds had no sound, or tread,
Shepherds and dogs and flocks were dead
In scores, and therefore dumb.

'Parodies are gloriously easy, are they not? I feel very like a poet.'

'My dear Hobbie, remember the lady in "Hyperion"—"Sir," said she, with dignity, "you have been drinking"—you must have mixed a second grog, unconsciously, or you would not joke about our probable ruin, and make ruffianly parodies.'

'Well, old fellow,' said Hobbie, 'I stand reproved; and now for business. What are we to do?'

'I have been thinking,' answered Gilbert, 'and I

adhere to our first idea maugre Countemout's gloomy possibilities. We are not above three parts stocked. Let us get the remaining fences at the back finished, while there is a little grass left.'

'Advertise at once for another set of well-sinkers, and if we strike water at a reasonable depth, we shall have feed to keep us going, unless it's a worse drought than anything since 1837. I think we may risk it,' asserted Hobbie, much assured by his elder's confident bearing. 'We are not like Jack Bulmer, who is fully stocked and has a lot of cattle. I suspect he *must* travel.'

'Most likely; the run looked bare when I was down last, and three thousand store cattle which he put on last season, all at once, destroy much grass. All the same, he will fight his way through somehow, as of yore. But his movements need not govern ours.'

CHAPTER IX

SINCE the foregoing council of war months had passed. No rain had fallen. None appeared likely to fall. The skies were as iron and the earth as brass. Day followed day, clear but monotonously cloudless. The glory of the dark-blue summer sky, in which burned nightly 'the stars in their courses,' was fast becoming to the souls of the gazers, as they sickened from hope deferred, emblematic of sorrow and despair. They looked upon the unchanging heavens, which during a long succession of weeks had scarce been flecked by a cloud, as the ship-wrecked mariner regards the ocean calm, which, if unbroken, dooms him to the most fearful of deaths. The grass on the frontage flats had long been eaten, trampled, and dried up, so that the dusty level looked as if green sward were never again possible. Jack Bulmer's contingent of thirty thousand sheep, one-half of his whole stock, had long since passed *en route* for the mountains. He himself had gone on ahead to inspect a mountain plateau, which, cleared of snow in the warm spring weather, was now waving with green grass, and traversed by clear, cool mountain streams. He was in great spirits as usual on his return, and

declared he wouldn't have missed the drought with its attendant adventures for any pecuniary consideration whatever.

'What's the use of jeremiads about the drought?' demanded he, 'and why this despondent tone? Go up to the Devil's Punch Bowl and see for yourselves. Scenery there you never dreamt of. Regular sanitary station; another Simla, by Jove! Lots of nice fellows. Sheep splendid fleeces next year. Extra clip, pay shearing expenses, give you my honour!'

'Is it open country or timbered?' inquired Hobbie.

'Rather thick until you get into the plateau, and then glorious downs and rolling prairie. Famous green grass, a little coarse or so, lovely little brooks—regular brooks, by George, running the summer through; sheep in clover. Cold at night, quite enjoyed a fire, grand snow-peaks, regular Alpine region, native inhabitants cattle-stealers to a man, but simple and friendly. Why don't you fellows come? I can rent you some country on the mountain plain. I've got more than I can use.'

'To tell the truth, Jack,' answered Gilbert resolutely, 'we are not so fully stocked as you, and have decided to stay at home. We believe that with the two back paddocks, especially as the wells have turned out so good, we can keep all the sheep unless things are worse than they have been known to be.'

'Well, of course, you can try, old fellow, and you certainly have more grass than any run I know except "Tungamain" and "Maradheree," but don't you hang on too long.'

'We must risk that, I know,' replied Gilbert, 'and a terrible hazard it is. But we have thought the

matter well over, and we are resolved to abide the issue.'

'Well, you will save the expense of travelling, which is fearful, absolutely fearful,' said Jack with much feeling. 'The cheques I've drawn since the blessed sheep started would bring tears to the eyes of a stock agent! It's shearing time all the year round—give you my honour! But there's no help for it. You can't exactly cut the beggars' throats. I suppose it *will* rain some day or another; I must be off now. Holmwood tells me his milkers at the station are living upon water-lilies in the lagoons, ha, ha! They'll soon have to dive for a subsistence at that rate. I hear there are thirty thousand sheep from the Bogan passing up to-morrow; look out for your frontage, Hobbie.'

So Bulmer the Berserker departed, leaving his friends troubled in mind, and doubting somewhat of the prudence of putting so large a stake on the board as thirty thousand sheep and the lives thereof.

'By Jove, it's an awful risk, Gilbert,' said Hobbie, after a long pause, during which they listened to the hoof echoes of Jack's wonderful gray dying away in the distance. 'Suppose the rain keeps off for six months we shan't save a sheep; they begin to look weak now. I almost wish we had taken Jack's offer and rented some of his country.'

'Too late now,' answered Gilbert; 'we've made our election and we must stick to it. The sheep are a long way from being "crawlers" yet. Mind you turn out early, and take Countemout to meet those Bogan sheep. If you don't watch them well, they'll strip every blade of grass within miles of the road.'

The morning was fresh and almost cool. A blood-red sun was slowly ensanguining the dim outline of the distant alp as Hobbie Elliot and Mr. Countemout rode briskly along the dusty road towards the western gate. How changed was the colour of the vast meadow or 'river flat' from the garb of spring! Instead of a prairie, a natural hay-field, rich with wild oats and tall with many a waving tassel, the wide brown level lay bare and arid. Far as the eye could reach on either side there was not only no sign of vegetation, green (save the mark), yellow, or brown, but the whole desolate area looked as if eternally devoted to barrenness. Looked as if grass could never grow there again—as if not only the stalks and tufts, but the very roots of all grass and herbage had perished, now and for evermore. The broad lagoons, deep and cool, with floating silver-petalled water-lilies, and populous with waterfowl, were now dry, dusty, and swept clear of every suspicion of reed or weed.

'They say these Bogan sheep are frightfully weak,' remarked Hobbie, 'dying by hundreds. Poor devils! they won't get much better here if we keep them to their half mile on each side of the road.'

'Of course we must do that,' said Countemout, 'or starve our own sheep. They *do say* that they lost three thousand between Baradine and Wilbandra; even worse than that since. Jefferson summoned the man in charge, and made him pay two men to kill and burn all the sheep left on his run.'

'That *was* sharp work, if you like. He might have been contented to take the risk of their dying

or living. It was too bad to make the unfortunate beggar pay for the murder of his own stock. We had better push on; I see them drawing off camp and the first flock passing through the gate.'

As they reached the boundary fence the first of the fifteen flocks had passed, and the long narrow line of sheep had extended itself along the dusty highway.

'Look at them, for God's sake!' said Hobbie. 'Did you ever see sheep walk along a road with their heads up like these? They don't seem to think it worth while to look for feed; what a fearful array of skeletons! If I met them at night I should take them for the ghost of a sheep station. I have scarcely the heart to tell the men to keep within the half mile from the road.'

They rode up to the advancing flock, which on closer inspection realised all the wretchedness of aspect which Hobbie had referred to. The delusive covering of their half-grown fleeces prevented the emaciation from being apparent. But the hollow eyes, the trembling limbs, the attenuated frames of the feeble creatures, were signs easily read by practised eyes. Flock after flock, file after file, the melancholy procession passed along. The worn and desperate animals never lowered their heads or walked from side to side after the manner of grazing sheep. Hopeless and nerveless, they had not sufficient energy to quit the beaten track in the vain search for pasture. Sullen and wayworn they passed slowly along the road. They neither halted nor wandered; all sensation seemed obliterated except a mechanical tendency to move aimlessly forward till

they dropped. And this process in one flock or other was continually taking place.

The men and shepherds who were driving the sheep assisted at the sombre function with morose countenances—even *they* felt distressed and demoralised.

'Good day,' said Mr. Countemout to the shepherd, 'this is a bad look-out. I never saw so large a lot of sheep so weak before; you will lose half of them before long.'

'Can't lose 'em faster than we're a-doin' now, unless the whole boiling drops down dead on camp some night,' answered the shepherd, an elderly man of acidulated aspect; 'and they'll do that soon unless rain comes. We're three thousand short since last week.'

'How do you come to be so late on the road?' asked Hobbie. 'All the down-river sheep have been at the mountains months ago.'

'Well, I believe our boss thought the water would hold out; the feed was middling good, but the back lakes dried up all of a sudden, and then we was started on the road with a rush like.'

'The river was all right, though, I suppose?'

'The river!' said the sun-scorched weather-beaten ancient—'the river!'

'Well,' retorted Hobbie tartly, 'I suppose there is always plenty of water in the river—enough for a hundred thousand sheep where you came from.'

'Water enough,' slowly returned the wayfarer. 'The stock might drink till all was blue, or drown theirselves in it for that matter; as to feed, I wish you could see it!'

'Pretty well picked over, I daresay,' assented Hobbie.

'Picked over!' growled the injured stranger, 'see here,' and he stirred the fine dust on the road with his foot, 'there's no more feed within twenty mile of the river then there is where we are standin', nor hasn't been for months.'

'What an awful state of things! what will become of the other stock down there, with three more months' dry weather?'

'God knows! there was Jackson's, and Hunt's, and Ronaldson's sheep back of us, as can't travel; they'll lose 'em in heaps and thousands, I am thinking. Here, wake 'em up, lass!' The dog he addressed, a wiry, restless, intelligent collie, with one blue eye and one brown ditto, had been ambling backward and forward behind her flock. She now barked and advanced. A feeble rush was the result, when half a dozen sheep fell instantly, and lay patiently, utterly incapable of rising. 'Come away, old woman,' said the shepherd apologetically, 'you've got more sense then I have. I'd never have told you to wake 'em up, only I was talking to the gentleman and thinking of somethink else. You see what it's like, sir. They've been like this for the last two hundred mile.'

'Where's the gentleman in charge of the sheep?' said Hobbie, 'Mr. Delafield, isn't that his name? I think the reporter said so.'

'Well, he went to Jildebah last night. We was camped close handy; he and the super had a barney, I believe, and a traveller told us to-day as Mr. Delafield was in Jildebah lock-up.'

'In the lock-up!' said Hobbie, much astonished, 'what in the world for?'

'Well, they tells me the Jildebah super has a rough side to his tongue, he has, and Mr. Delafield, though he is so quiet-looking, won't stand no nonsense from no man, and so Bouncin' Bill, as they calls 'im, fell off his 'orse.'

'And was that any reason to put a gentleman in the lock-up?'

'Well, sir, you don't tumble, if Bouncin' Bill did, perhaps he might have got a tap promiskus like. He's very quick with his hands, Mr. Delafield is, and uncommon neat—I don't know as ever I see a gent neater.'

'So,' said Hobbie, 'that's it! Now, this is Saturday, so he stands a good chance of being locked up till Monday, if I don't find him bail. Well, good-bye! Don't you fellows get straggling over my run, or I'll put you in the pound, shepherds and all. This gentleman will keep along with you while I go to Jildebah.'

Leaving Mr. Countemout to his monotonous but necessary occupation of riding at a foot-pace by the funereal flocks, thus restraining the shepherds from wandering into the heart of the run, pretending to lose themselves, and having to be fetched back after devouring every blade of grass in their way, Hobbie rode into the city of Jildebah. This imposing township seemed to be compounded in equal parts of dust, delirium-tremens, dulness, and broken bottles. It boasted several public-houses, two stores, a large graveyard, a small school, a blacksmith's shop, and a police barrack. To this latter establishment was

affiliated the aforesaid lock-up, popularly known as 'the logs,' from the preponderating quantity of these massive timbers displayed in the floor, the wall, and indeed the ceiling of the edifice.

'Senior Constable Ryan,' said Hobbie, J.P., in magisterial tones, as a good-looking, well-got-up police trooper came out of the barrack and saluted, 'what's this you've been about, confining a gentleman (the Governor's nephew, for all you know) in Jildebah lock-up, just like a horse-stealer?'

'Assault upon Mr. Rougham, your worship! Aggravated—Mr. Rougham's face much cut, sir.'

'Did you see the assault?'

'No, sir.'

'Then you had no right to arrest; I am surprised that you don't know better, Ryan, after all your experience. Bring the gentleman to the inn parlour, and ask Mr. Jones and Mr. Williams, with my compliments, if they will walk up.'

Ryan departed crestfallen. He was a smart fellow, and a staunch sleuth-hound on the trail of bushrangers, or horse-stealers, but from living in a poky place like Jildebah, had become too autocratic, and occasionally rendered himself open to proceedings involving damages.

Proceeding to the Jildebah Hotel Hobbie seated himself in an armchair, behind the table, at the upper end of the dining-room, and presently the 'prisoner' arrived, escorted by Ryan in full uniform, and stood in an easy nonchalant attitude before him. Messrs. Jones and Williams, burgesses of Jildebah, came in and, bowing respectfully, seated themselves upon the unyielding horsehair chairs of the imposing apart-

ment. The ordinary loungers of such a settlement, a shepherd or two whose cheques were only partially melted, a teamster, two Chinamen, and a blackfellow, and lastly, the hotel book-keeper, an aristocratic-looking personage with a large black beard, ranged themselves at the lower end, and awaited such tragedy as might be imminent.

'Cecil Delafield,' commenced Hobbie, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, 'you stand charged with an aggravated assault upon William Rougham of Jildebah. How do you plead?'

'Not guilty, your worship,' replied the captive knight, for such indeed *he looked*, in a soft *maniére* tone, as if he was talking to a pretty girl at a flower show.

'Very well,' said Hobbie. 'Senior Constable Ryan, go into the witness box!' That official did so by the fiction of advancing to the corner of the table, and, having been sworn, deposed as follows:—'My name is Patrick Ryan, I am senior constable of police, stationed at Jildebah; on the evening of yesterday, the 7th instant, at about half-past six, Mr. William Rougham gave the prisoner in charge for violently assaulting him. His face at the time was bleeding, and one eye contused and swollen. He said prisoner had assaulted him without provocation. I rode over to where I saw prisoner and arrested him. When I charged him with the offence he said "All right," and asked if the lock-up was empty. I locked him up. Upon searching I found four five-pound notes and some silver, which I produce, a tooth-brush, a gold watch, a penknife, and a photograph.'

Cross-examined by prisoner: 'Did not see you commit any assault.'

'Sign your deposition,' said Hobbie, who had duly written down this important evidence, 'and at this stage I will adjourn the case till Friday next, when the police magistrate of Moona-Warraban will attend. Cecil Delafield, bail is allowed, sureties, two in £25 each, yourself in £50. Mr. Jones, Mr. Williams, are you content to be bound?' These worthy tradespeople bowed. 'The prisoner stands remanded to Friday next—Mr. Delafield, you can go.'

Mr. Delafield duly appeared before the Court on the afternoon of Friday, as did also Mr. Rougham. Consequent on the arrival of the police magistrate of the district, a leading solicitor made his appearance, who was at once retained for the defence.

CHAPTER X

After Mr. Rougham had told his tale and exhibited his injuries, the first witness for the defence was sworn and deposed as follows :—

'My name's Bill, leastways William Dickson, mail driver. I was a-lookin' for horses in the crick, I see most of this row. Billy Rougham, he gallops down swearing at this gentleman as if he'd eat him. Asked him why the h—l he come down their frontage, stealin' all the grass and starving people's sheep. Said he was travelling for feed, and grass stealers was worse nor sheep stealers, why didn't they keep on the road, and not go through his river flats, making believe they'd lost theirselves? Said he'd knock his damned head off for sixpence. This gentleman said he thought it *was* the main road. "You're a liar," says Rougham, "fellows as steal grass would tell a lie for sixpence any day. You go off this private land, it's a pre-emptive right, or I'll make you." The gentleman said he didn't think it was private land. Would go off when he chose—not afore.'

'Now, did any one *do* anything?' inquired the police magistrate. 'Never mind repeating these conversations.'

'Yes, they did, my word!' said the witness. 'Your

worships, I'm just a-comin' to 'em. "I shall not go," says this gentleman, "how do I know it's private land?" "I'll soon show you," says Rougham—with that he shoves his horse right agin the gen'leman's, as was that weak and low, as he pretty nigh fell down, and makes a crack at him. Ha! ha!'

It was demanded by the Bench of the witness why he laughed—and he was sternly ordered to proceed.

'I couldn't help it, your worships, to see how old Billy, as fancies he can welt any man about Jildebah, was took in. The gent threw back his 'ead, and as Billy having missed 'is stroke, was drawed a bit forrard, he lets him have it—one, two, right atween the eyes. Mr. Super Rougham tumbles off his 'orse, with 'is face altered considerably for the wuss, and makes for the bobby. That's all I know about it.'

The Bench having heard this with other evidence, cross-examination, re-examination, and all the usual inventions for filling up the time of the Court, held as follows:—

That Mr. Delafield was probably feeding his sheep on the Jildebah pre-emptive right in ignorance of boundaries; that the assault complained of appeared, though technically illegal, to have been in self-defence; and that Mr. Rougham had been proved to have acted violently and abusively. Under all the circumstances, they would dismiss the case with two guineas costs—of Court. Mr. Delafield went home with Hobbie and stayed a couple of days at Wandaroona. He was not obliged to be always with his sheep, having a deputy upon whom he could depend for counting, and the like. He was an entertaining

man of the world, once a thriving squatter, now a salaried superintendent. He did not appear to repine greatly at his altered fate. 'After all,' he said, 'health and spirits are the great facts of existence. I am pretty hard worked, but I enjoy my pipe, my meals, a book, the society of gentlemen, and sleep like a top. I don't know that I was happier when I was rich.'

'Awfully depressing work, I should say,' said Gilbert, 'travelling with weak sheep in weather like this.'

'You may say that,' assented their guest sincerely, 'even the men feel it, though of course their pay is all the same. What with no feed, a scarcity of water, the terrible losses we have had since starting, and the present uncertainty of rain, I feel pretty reckless. I cannot help matters. I can only see the sheep die. I don't intend even to count them till rain comes.'

'I daresay you're right,' said Hobbie. 'You can't stop them dying, and you can have the melancholy satisfaction of knowing how many are killed, wounded, and missing all at once.'

'Quite my idea. We are five thousand short now, and if it does not rain for another two or three months (and I see no likelihood of the drought breaking up) not a sheep will go back to the lower Bogan.'

'Had you any stages without water, before you got to the Oxley?' asked Gilbert.

'We had two nights and a day; awfully hot weather, too. I shall never forget it,' said Delafield. 'We had travelled all one night, it was fairly cool, though dusty. The next day was hot, the sheep

became obstinate and we could hardly get them along. At night they seemed utterly beat and exhausted. We had a miserable attempt at a meal, a short smoke, and then orders were given to march. We dogged the sullen, tired brutes along the dusty road the long night through. It was breezeless and sultry, though comparatively cool after the scorching day. All night we toiled on, however, knowing that if we stopped another day, without reaching water, we should lose every sheep.

'The men behaved well too. They kept going and said little, as is the custom of Englishmen when there is danger or need. As the dawn broke—I thought it would *never* come—and the clouds of dust rolled back from the host of panting sheep, I saw a dark line on the horizon. It was the "river timber" of the Oxley.'

'By the beard of the Prophet!' exclaimed Hobbie, 'that *was* a touch of the Great Desert; and so the caravan was saved, and all of you performed your ablutions with water instead of sand, and returned thanks to Allah, like devout Mussulmans.'

'We shall all turn Mahometans, I believe, if we live here long enough. Religion is partly a matter of climate.'

'How did you contrive to water them?'

'That was the difficulty. After a short rest, we went slowly on, having hope before us in the actual course of the river, but for which I think we should have lain down and died—dogs, horses, men, and sheep. When we got a reasonable distance from the river, I ordered one flock forward, intending to detach them, and water gradually for fear of accidents

But we were nearer the water than I had reckoned. As soon as the happy first flock scented the water, they began to bleat and run—the other flocks caught the infection. All commenced to run and made one grand stampede in spite of our efforts, so in a wonderfully short time, considering our late rate of progression, the whole twenty-five thousand sheep, mad with thirst and excitement, hurled themselves into the deep clear water, where many were drowned and as many more smothered. They drew back by degrees into the polygonum flat which at that point bordered the river. We had a comparatively happy camp of it that night. They didn't need watching. But when morning and the usual count came, there was a considerable deficit. However, that disaster is mourned and buried, and we are nerving ourselves for the next. Do you feel inclined to speculate?

'Would you sell them?' asked Gilbert. 'What's the price? though it's a superfluous question, as no one can buy now, unless he cuts the throats of his own sheep as a preliminary. However, let us hear, that we may have the mournful pleasure of knowing what good sheep are worth in a drought.'

'I had a telegram yesterday from Melbourne,' said their guest, slowly and deliberately, as if enjoying the flavour of the jest, 'permitting me to sell the whole lot for two shillings per head. Six months' bill.'

'Death and all the furies! Hades and destruction!' shouted Hobbie; 'are we live and sane assessment-paying squatters? Well-bred, well-framed merino ewes, with seven months' wool on, offered at *two shillings per head!* and refused at that!'

'Isn't it awful?' chimed in Gilbert; 'we have thirty thousand sheep, and at that rate they are worth just three thousand pounds—exactly *one-sixth* of what we gave for store sheep four years ago—and glad to get them.'

'Now is the time to buy,' said Delafield, 'if you want to back the field against the season. I would if I had the cash or credit. I always liked a long shot, or I should not be here. Deuced comfortable place it is too! I know of two thousand fine full-fleeced weaners being sold the other day for *ninepence* a head!'

'Don't tell us any more,' entreated Hobbie; 'it's dreadful either way. If no rain comes, we be all dead men—horse, foot, and dragoons. If it *does* come—we shall be ready to cut our throats at having lost such glorious chances of a rapid fortune. Let us smoke and turn in. Life is becoming lurid and oppressive.'

Their pleasant guest had gone. Weeks had passed. Still the endless succession of cloudless days and starry nights. Drier still and more dismal was the face of all nature. As the autumn wore on and the winter—in name—approached, the nights became longer, colder—the enfeebled sheep more wan and shrunken. Other troops of ovine spectres had passed in sad array, foreshadowing to the brothers the probable fate of the whole stock of Wandaroona. The river was low; creeks, water-holes, and dams were drying up; every day hands were sent forth to pull sheep out which, hopelessly bemired, and too weak even to struggle, stood or lay in rows around each watering-place. Yet again

another month—another month of monotonous work, of anxiety, of increasing though as yet inconsiderable loss. The drought still relaxed nothing of its cruel grip, in which the whole country from Albury to Adelaide, from the Wimmera to Roma, was held. Tales of terrible losses—of widespread ruin and desolation—came from every side and filled the journals with lamentation and woe.

The wealthiest stock-holders commenced to speculate on the chances of total loss. The banks, long-suffering and forbearing, less from any uncommercial sentiment of mercy than from calculation and the dread of precipitating a general insolvency, were hardly pressed. Rumours floated in the air of coming financial revolutions, of depreciated shares, and darksome days of reckoning.

All the portents of the day were storm signals, so to speak—combining to foretell a financial earthquake; the toppling down of a grand structure of pastoral prosperity, reared by the energy and intelligence of less than two generations of Britons. All the social croakers in the land (the frogs being chiefly mute by reason of the absence of water, and the conversion of all marshes and pools into brick-dust wildernesses) set up their consolatory chorus—'Drought coming to an end? Not the slightest chance of it; might last years yet. The present race of colonists had never *seen* a drought. Sheep and cattle poor? Nothing to '37 and '38. Every one would have to live upon rice and gum leaves as they did in the great three years' drought in the thirties. In their youth, the blacks had a tradition of a drought which had lasted *six years* and

had killed whole tribes of their own people; when you could catch dingoes by the tail, they were so weak; when the Murray and Murrumbidgee were simply chains of water-holes. As for stock, they had always known that when they increased without check or drawback they would become as valueless as in South America, where cattle and horses are killed for their hides. But that didn't matter much, as before next year there would not be a cow, a sheep, or a horse alive. Why did they come to such a country, or stay in it either?' it was demanded of them. 'Why? because they were fools—like every one else in the infernal country, except the rogues, and they were the only people in accord with the requirements of the place.' A good deal of this cheerful and encouraging talk was indulged in about this gloomy period. The larger minds decried these theories, but backed up by unkind fate they had a harmony with nature that gave them adventitious weight and power for evil.

It was on the sixteenth day of June 1867 that Gilbert and Hobbie Elliot, with the faithful Countem-out, sat in the verandah at Wandaroona smoking as of old. It might have been a council of war, but no one spoke. Gloom, if not despair, sat on every brow.

All looked worn, moody, hardly so resigned as reckless. The untasted liquor stood before them as they smoked and gazed upon the soft-hued sky on this 'night of all nights in the year,' having less than the ordinary fatal splendour which had become of late so ominous.

'I feel as if I could lie down and die, like the

sheep,' said Gilbert wearily, at length. 'I see nothing but destruction, total ruin indeed, before us if this weather lasts. Such an awful pity too, after our successful fencing. I was out to-day looking at the wretched, low-conditioned sheep. A large lot was coming in from "the back" to water, just as an equally large lot was leaving it, and going back for twenty-four hours' feed. In spite of my misery, I could not help smiling to see how cleverly the two flocks managed matters.'

'What did they do?' asked Hobbie languidly—'box up together?'

'Not a bit of it; they met and parted, just as store and fat cattle would separate from each other. The sheep, three or four thousand, which had watered, marched soberly and solemnly outwards, without turning to right or left, right through the advancing column. The unwatered sheep held straight on towards the creek; finally the outgoing flock extricated itself, and entered the timber, without the admixture of a single sheep. And now, all our hopes and time, labour and money are——'

'Not irretrievably gone to the bad, for all that is said and done,' interrupted Hobbie. 'Don't throw up the sponge till the fight is over. A good rally makes all the difference at the finish. Matters look blue, of course, but we have had no losses yet, to speak of. We can send away some as a forlorn hope, and it *may* rain yet!'

'The travelling dodge won't wash, anyhow,' struck in Mr. Countemout. 'The time is past for that, and they may as well die here, where we can get their skins, as on the road. I was round

the back wells to-day, and the sheep are all as nearly as possible in exactly the same state of strength, that is of weakness. They can walk and keep on their legs, and that is about all. If we wait to travel them on that stockyard of a road, they would drop in hundreds and thousands. If rain does not come within a fortnight, they'll begin to die at the rate of five hundred a day.'

'I'm afraid you're not far wrong,' agreed Hobbie. 'But if it doesn't rain next week, I'm off to the mountains with twenty thousand sheep—die or no die, I'll make a fight for it.'

'We can do our best, of course,' said Countemout. 'I'll go with you; we'll leave Gilbert in charge of the house and the crawlers.'

'It's a pity now we didn't start in November with Bulmer. His sheep are doing first-rate in the mountains.'

'One can't say what the country is coming to,' pursued Gilbert. 'Another six months of dry weather, which is quite possible, would make all this Riverina country a perfect valley of dry bones. I see, from the *Pastoral Times*, that Fossill's herd at Lake Warringong has had to shift. Fancy Warringong dry! next thing to the Bay of Biscay—and ten thousand head of cattle travelling for food and water!'

'It won't ruin Fossill if they all die,' remarks the superintendent. 'He has many another station, though I remember him when all the stock he had were two kangaroo dogs.'

'Ha! ha!' shouted Hobbie, surprised into a laugh — and his cheery natural outburst infected slightly the melancholy seniors. 'Fancy the great

squatter—The Honourable Abraham Fossill, M.L.C. —a slender super, on his promotion! Always economical through, and saving up his money to buy a few cattle. What an inconvenient memory you have, Countemout. Come, Gilbert, laugh like a good fellow, and put your trust in Providence. I don't say that in jest. As I live, the clouds are gathering, and that *was* a drop of rain.'

'A Riverina sham,' said Gilbert bitterly. 'How many scores of times has the sky clouded over lately and set fair again! I am half sick of shadows, like the Lady of Shalott. Hope deferred, you know.'

'Four drops upon five acres,' chimed in Countemout. 'That's about the regulation quantity up here. Hand over the brandy, Hobbie, if you please. I feel as if a glass of grog would do us all good to-night.'

CHAPTER XI

'"LET us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die"—is that your philosophy?' said Gilbert. 'Eating is necessary and drinking is pleasant, but to-morrow is the inevitable cross-examiner, and what a bad quarter of an hour the witness has of it, if he has exceeded the modest tumbler the night before. If ever I take to poverty as an habitual practice I shall drink nothing but tea and smoke mild tobacco. With a sound digestion, regret may be borne and adversity faced, but alcoholism dips the sting of remorse in poison. Then the knight must fare forth. "Out over the wall, out into the night, three hundred feet of fall."'

'I'll trouble you for the "battle-axe,"' inconsequently returned Hobbie. 'I agree in the main with your reasoning, but this is a night of electrical disturbance, as if strange events were imminent.'

'"Too much of anything is not good," said the Indian, "but too much fire-water is just enough." What heads fellows must have though who overbrandy themselves! What awakenings and fearful looking for judgment; I don't wonder that they suicide now and then.'

'It's all luck,' quoth Countemout, 'or Circumstance. I knew a station of which all the owners—and

there were four, that followed one another—drank themselves to death. There was a mineral spring on it, and the temptation to mix brandy therewith was irresistible.'

'What an ill-omened spot—as gloomy a legend as you could hear about a ruined castle, with melancholy sighing trees and weed-grown avenue, in the old country!' remarked Gilbert. 'A place where the heir always went mad or died young, and which the irreverent Crœsus gazed at wistfully, but dared not buy.'

'Your probable losses are beginning to bring on softening of the brain, Gilbert, or are you and Countemout going in for literary enterprise when the sheep are all dead? Why, there never was even a ghost in this dried-up, miserable, new country of ours.'

'No ghosts, did you say?' asked Countemout in a strangely altered tone, as he gazed out into the distance with fixed and staring eyes. 'Did you never hear of the "Grey Woman"?'

'You don't mean to say, old fellow, that you've seen *her*,' said Hobbie, 'and that the story is all true? Excuse me for laughing. I didn't remark how serious you were at first. Is it a true tale?'

'It may not be true that we are sitting here in the flesh; it may not be true that the season is dry, that the flocks are starving,' said the overseer, with all trace of jesting banished from his face. 'But if these be facts, it is no less one that I saw the Appearance of that foully murdered woman, long after she had gone to her doom.'

'Let us have it then, by all means,' said Gilbert, who had noted their companion's changed manner. 'Countemout, help yourself and pass the brandy. I feel rather in need of a sensation. Now, go ahead, old man, we can't be *more* miserable than we are.'

'What I am about to tell,' commenced the bushman, 'came to pass many a year ago. Things were different then—men lived a wilder life; there were not a police station and half-a-dozen magistrates round every bit of a township like Jildebah. The stations were far apart. The masters mostly lived away from them. Money was scarce, stock cheap, and good men who knew their work and could do it were hard to get. They had more of their own way than in these days; and what they had been, or what their moral tone was like, were matters little heeded as long as the brandings and musters went on all right.

'I was a youngster when I went to live as a kind of offside manager at one of old Captain Grimwood's cattle-runs. It had been a bad place for blacks. Stock-riders had been speared; bloody reprisals had taken place there. This happened before my time; I heard tales though from the stock-riders that were enough to make one's hair stand on end.

'There was one distant out-station at which lived a man, commonly called "Black Ned"—a saturnine, silent sort of fellow whom I instinctively shrank from. A splendid stock-rider, he was held in some kind of estimation by the overseer, old Driver, and other wicked veterans of the

place, for having defended his hut from an attack made by blacks. He shot many before they raised the siege, and an unknown number afterwards, by which ruthless deed he had acquired honour and renown of the old bush pattern.

'He was a good-looking ruffian in his way. He had just the gaudy, scene-painted kind of outward appearance that attracts foolish women. Good Lord! they *are* foolish! For the rest, he was tall and muscular, with coal-black hair and beard. His eyes were remarkable enough—when he was crossed and dared to show his temper.

'He and I were never friends; I had heard of a brutal act of his long ago—nailing a wretched black by the hands to the stockyard—and I could not conceal my abhorrence. He hated me and I knew it; he was not so young as he looked at first sight, and in his cups — for, of course, he drank hard at times; what bushman in those days did not? — he let slip hints of more important villanies.

'This respected person was despatched by his master (I don't mean the Devil, but old Captain Grimwood) on an overland journey with a heavy drove of store cattle to one of the coast towns. He remained away three or four months; he was successful as usual (let us give the Devil his due), and the cattle sold well. His return produced a kind of revolutionary excitement in the population of the station and of the neighbourhood. An event had occurred which no one, in the wildest stage of delirium tremens, had figured among the fancies of a fevered brain—Black Ned had brought back a wife!

'A curiously large proportion of the strayed stock of the surrounding runs, as well as our own, from that time must have concluded that Ned's out-station was the land of Goshen, or in the direct line thereto. Horses were picked up just close by. Cattle, it was thought, "might have made out that way." Even lost flocks of sheep were last seen heading in that direction.

'It might have been the flat in front of the hut; it might have been the cool depths of the Wild Horse Waterhole, the deepest pool in all the creek, which attracted the stock. But, in consequence of these or other reasons, it became necessary for every stock-rider to call at Black Ned's hut, which involved necessarily a sight of Black Ned's wife.

'"What was she like?" How many score times was that question asked — women were scarcer in those days in the bush—and generally answered in this wise: "Well, not so much to look at—slim and rather pale, with yellowish hair, but very genteel-like; didn't talk much—perhaps might be afraid of Ned ('And well she may be,' added one of the audience). Flash Jack, who went with the cattle, told Bill Davis she was a lady, or leastways a governess; but could not vouch for the latter fact, not having seen any since he was a boy."

'The nine days' wonder ceased. The stock-riders' wives and other humble women who went to see the wonderful stranger, spoke of her as wearing a subdued air, talking pleasantly, but without interest, to her simple visitors.

'Ned seemed kind enough, quite a different man; they pitied the poor thing shut up there, with

never a soul to speak to, and she not used to the bush, any one could see with half an eye; always wore a gray dress too—pretty made up, but always the one colour. "Well, sooner her than me." This was always the wind-up; every one felt, who had known her ill-omened mate, that hers was a fate that the meanest among them would have shrunk from.

'I never went there myself, hating the brute as I did, and thinking I should see his wife time enough. I was worked off my legs also, and had not that abounding leisure which leads to curiosity about other men's wives. But one day I had been out since sunrise, and on my return fell in with some strayed stock which took me near the Wild Horse Waterhole. I was watering mine there, and standing by him when I saw a woman walking down from the hut with a bucket in her hand. I noticed the gray dress—the yellow hair—the slight figure. It was Ned's wife, of course. She did not see me till she came close to the water, when, my horse making a movement, she stopped and raised a pair of dreamy blue eyes wonderingly to my face. It was a clear spring morning. The air was clear, the sun-rays, scarce above the darkening range, touched with faint fire her hair, her form, her parted lips, her delicate features—I can see her now. What a vision of loveliness she seemed to me then. I was a youngster, no wonder my head was turned. More than all, *I had seen her before.*

'A wonder of wonders, but it was true. How the old Devonshire village came back to me for a moment, all fresh and life-like, at the glamour of a

woman's face. The bright green meadow, the rippling brook, the old hall, the russet-coloured farm-houses, the mill-stream near which I had spent so many a holiday, and the miller's daughter—I saw the whole scene as clearly as that creeper on the verandah for one moment; then came back the strange new-world landscape—the far ranges, the wild forest, the sullen pond, and the miller's daughter—here, here! I rushed up to her, seized her hand in both of mine, and sobbed like a child. "Jane Maythorn! is it indeed you, all the way from Enderby and the old mill; or are my thoughts about home driving me mad, and is this the beginning of it?"

'Her look of settled sadness passed away, and for a moment I saw a faint reflection of the merry look I knew so well flit over the pale face. It had faded when she said, "What, Elmtree Jack of the Barton? Who ever expected to see you in this wretched, wretched country? But"—drawing herself away with a frightened expression—"you mustn't be sentimental at the sight of an old friend; you used not to be so. Bring your horse up to the hut, and surely we may have a talk about the dear old times." She turned away as she spoke, and as I went for Walk-over, who was feeding stock-horse fashion with the reins under his feet, I saw that her whole frame was shaken; that tears were trickling fast through her slender fingers which she pressed passionately to her brow.

'She told me her story—not uncommon, perhaps, but sad enough. The old miller had lost money, then lost heart, fallen ill, and died. Her friends

were not too kind to a penniless girl. She was persuaded to emigrate, had fallen in with Ned at the Port, where, well dressed and flush of money, he had passed himself off as an up-country squatter. Confused and desponding, in a strange land, she had consented to a hasty marriage, and had realised doubtless—though this she would not own—the hopeless misery of her present position as the wife of one of the most ruthless scoundrels that ever disgraced humanity. I comforted her as well as I was able. I told her she might trust me in any need as a brother; that I would for her sake make friends with Ned as far as was possible. She thanked me with a sad smile, and as she held out her hand at parting, a look of such unutterable despair was in her mournful eyes, that I could not repress a groan as I mounted old Walkover, and striking spurs into his sides, left the lonely hut far behind.

'"Pretty Jane Maythorn, merry Jane," thought I, "has it come to this? Half playmate, half sweetheart, in the girl-and-boy days, when I lived with my uncle, old Mark Countemout, at the Barton, and he used to joke me about fishing so near the mill. 'Eh, lad! fond of fishing—must be some good trout there! Young blood—young blood—ha, ha!' She was a shy lass of sixteen or so, when we sat under the old spreading alders, and played in the long happy summer days at fishing. Didn't I climb the old elm-tree because she was looking on, and breaking my arm by the fall from a rotten upper branch, gained my village sobriquet, which never afterwards left me? And now she is

here—living at the Wild Horse Waterhole! How inscrutable are the ways of Providence! Emigration, which has led tens of thousands of poor souls into unaccustomed liberty or sudden wealth in Australia, has brought her to a veritable house of bondage—to a living death."

'By Jove, it's raining steadily!—I'm making an awful long yarn of it.'

'Never mind the rain,' said Hobbie; 'if you allude to it, it will stop at once—I wonder you don't know that. Go on, old man.'

'Fill your glass and go on,' said Gilbert. 'Too much is turning upon this night's rain for us to think of sleep. There's ruin or reprieve in the clouds this night before morning dawns; so tell us your tale of the life ruin that looks so imminent. Time enough for sleep afterwards.' He lighted his freshly filled meerschaum, and lay back in his armchair with watchful eyes. The overseer drained a full glass, which gave no glow to the bronzed features; and to the faint rhythmic measure of the ceaseless rain-drips, the strong man told all-tenderly of his unburied dead.

'I kept my promise to poor Jane. I smoothed the bloodhound her mate, and patched up a sort of half-and-half friendship. I arranged opportunities for the decenter women on the station and in the neighbourhood of the place to afford her a little social intercourse. I carefully avoided any appearance of special interest which might rouse his suspicious nature. My efforts were aided by those around me, and a slight increase of apparent cheerfulness on Jane's pale face showed, in the rare

intervals when we met, that I had done good. But no one hoped for much. All knew him too well. Jane was looked upon as a doomed creature, and no one who had ever known or heard of Black Ned thought of hers as anything but a tragic ending.

'I was compelled to visit a distant station in what was called "the new country." On my return the station was full of a new story. Black Ned had been drinking, had been jealous, and had cruelly beaten his unfortunate wife. What else, indeed, it was said, could be expected? It was the old thing over again. Hadn't he, etc. etc. etc.—if she didn't get away she was a dead woman,—and so on.

'I felt inclined to kill the ruffian myself, but thought it prudent to dissemble, lest I might lose all chance of assisting my ill-fated playmate. So I said little, and determined to see her somehow.

'An opportunity soon offered. He was sent away to fetch horses from a distant run. Starting from the home station in another direction, I took a circuit, and once more found myself at the Wild Horse Waterhole. Jane was sitting in an attitude which implied the stupor of dejection, and hardly raised her head as I entered. She looked wildly at me for a moment, and then, falling on her knees, cried out, "Oh, Jack! dear Jack! take me away from this dreadful place. I shall go mad if I stay—that is, if he" (and she shuddered) "does not kill me first. What a wicked man he is! I am like a woman who has sold herself to the fiend. I am most truly in hell—in hell! What have I done that I should be so tortured?"

'I comforted her as much as I could. I told her

that in some way I would get her to the Port, and she might then go by sea to one of the other colonies, or even to England, and that I would pay her passage-money myself. "Oh, let me go home—home to the old village and die!" she said, like one praying for life. "If I could only see the cottage, and the meadow, and the mill-stream again, I could die like a child asleep in its mother's arms. I could work, do anything, only to live or die there—it matters not which now." She told me how she had been frightened by his fearful looks and words during his dreadful debauch; how some trifling act had excited his causeless jealousy; and how, after a savage accusation, he had cruelly beaten her with his stock-whip; that she had thought of drowning herself, and might yet, if no help came of God or man.

'I could no longer resist her entreaties. It might be scarcely justifiable to aid in her flight from her lawful custodian, but I was young and rash, and could not stand by without striking in. I arranged that she should leave the hut on a certain evening and meet a trusted ally of mine, who would ride with her to the nearest point, many miles distant, at which the mail-cart—no coaches then—could be met. When she reached the Port arrangements would be made for her voyage. She thanked me with her sad eyes, in speechless gratitude.

'I made my preparations carefully. I was not without dread of the spies which exist in all communities, and Black Ned had his familiars. I was confirmed in this by his suddenly drawing up to me as we were mustering cattle one day. "Look here, young fellow!" he said. "You've been seen at

my place more than once while I've been away. I don't want to say much now, but if ever I find you and her talking and colloguing together I'll knock her brains out, and yours too, as sure as my name's Ned Charlock. She won't be the first woman I've put away, if you believe the yarns about here." Here the ruffian sneered, as if I might choose whether I should credit him or otherwise.

'I was taken by surprise, and lost my temper wholly. "How dare you talk about your wife in that way," I said, "you murdering scoundrel, that the gallows ought to have had long ago! I know how you've ill-treated her, and, by the Lord God! if I ever hear that you ill-use her again, I'll flog you from here to the next Court-house, and back, if they don't keep you there. Come off your horse and strike a *man*, you cowardly, black-shooting, woman-beating dog!"

'He turned paler as I spoke, his eyes burned with a baleful glare, and he made as though to rush at me, as several of the station hands rode up. I was as strong as a bull then—always in training; and he, though a known bruiser, was none the better, like me now, for twenty years of hard life and hard——' Here the overseer drained his glass with a half sigh.

CHAPTER XII

'THE men gathered round with the sincere interest that the expectation of a fair fight always arouses in Englishmen or their descendants. They were disappointed, however, for Black Ned put an evident constraint on himself, merely saying, with a hellish curl of his lip: "You mind your business, youngster, and I'll mind mine."

'"Now, then, you staring fools, are you going to let all the cattle draw off the camp, and be hanged to you!" growled Driver, swearing at the men as they dispersed. Then he muttered, "I never saw Ned turn tail before, and if murder don't come of it, I'm a myall blackfellow."

'I was full of self-reproach for letting my temper out, all the more that I knew Ned would visit his discomfiture before the station hands upon the head of his unhappy wife. I heard in a general way that his conduct to her was systematically brutal, almost unbearably so. But I trusted that she would be able to avail herself of my plan for her escape. As the time wore on I received one day a few hurried lines by a hawker: "Do not fear as to keeping the appointment on Saturday evening. I will do so if I am alive.—J."

'The day arrived. I made the excuse of seeing some back-country cattle, and rode at evening to where the man I had sent with the horse for Jane was to wait for the mail. She never came. The driver waited good-naturedly as long as he dared, but no one came. Heart-sick and foreboding I retraced my steps, and, bold in despair, rode through the night till I came to the Wild Horse Waterhole. I looked; I rubbed my eyes. Did my senses deceive me? No hut was there. A mass of charred timber, a heap of smouldering ashes, showed where the building had been. I learned when I returned to the home station that Black Ned had ridden hard in the direction of the hut just before dark. A search was made in all directions next day. Black Ned said his wife had disappeared—run away to her friends, he supposed—and set the hut a-fire before she went. But from that hour to this she has never been seen or heard of alive.'

'I suppose he had found out your friendly conspiracy and misconstrued it,' said Hobbie.

'God only knows!' answered the overseer; 'I knew the hawker was a rogue, and may have shown the letter he gave me. My heart to her was as pure as a brother's. I should have as soon thought of murdering a babe as wronging the helpless creature that was cast upon my charity in her sore need.'

'And was nothing ever heard or discovered to clear up the mystery?' asked Gilbert.

'Nothing that amounted to much. I scoured the country in all directions, put the blacks on the tracks; did everything; nothing was discovered. One man, a traveller, who was camped near the

spot on that evening heard shrieks and cries, as of a woman being beaten, but did not go up to the place. He was not a strong man, and he thought Black Ned, if he was interfered with, capable of knocking him on the head, or cutting his throat (as it was said he did ——'s). This was all. It might have been her, abused, beaten, murdered—who can tell? There was no further evidence; all was mystery and gloom. The earth had swallowed them up as far as I was concerned. Jane was never seen more on this earth. But something tells me that her murderer lives; and if I ever hear of his being sentenced to death for any other crime, I will ride a thousand miles to see him hanged. How the rain comes down! doesn't it?' he continued, lighting his pipe.

'It does seem heavier,' said Gilbert; 'but I am not an impartial witness. The clouds are lower, and the air feels strangely sultry. It may rain to some purpose yet. Good Lord! if it only kept on for twenty-four hours, the country would be saved.'

'Two o'clock in the morning!' said Hobbie; 'not that I feel the least sleepy, Countemout, but I think you said something about—— Did you ever think you saw the poor girl's apparition?'

'Think?' said the overseer,—'think? *I saw her*, as I hope for mercy hereafter. It was this way. I left the place, hating all belonging to it, and led a reckless overlanding life, earning money fast, and spending it after the same fashion. Years afterwards I happened to be travelling with sheep over the same country, and by a succession of accidents was compelled to pass near the Wild Horse Waterhole. I had been back on our trail, and came on at night-

fall to find that Jim Hayward, an active young native, my second in command, had camped the sheep at the accursed spot. He seemed surprised at my displeasure, but held his tongue.

'The night was cloudy, with a faint struggling moon. The hut had never been rebuilt, and we were not far from its still visible ruin. The sheep were troublesome for the early part of the night, and gave us both enough to do. Towards morning we lay down beside our fire, wrapped in blankets, and fell asleep. It may have been an hour before dawn, when my companion roused me hurriedly. "Listen!" he said. "Did you hear that? Good God! what can it be?" I sat up, then started to my feet, as a cry, a succession of cries, came distinctly from the spot where the hut had been. Agony and mortal fear were in the wailing sounds which, at times low and sobbing, rose to the wildest shrieks.

'"By ——! some brute is beating a woman," said Jim; "where on earth could they have been, and we not seen them before dark? Oh, Lord! look—look!"

'I had been spellbound, for even in the strange unnatural sounds, impossible to account for, at the time and place, I had recognised my old companion's voice. As Jim Hayward spoke, his bold tones changing to a hollow whisper, I looked and saw—yes, I *saw* a shape passing quickly from the mound, where the hut had been, down the path to the water-hole where I had first seen Jane. My heart stood still; like one in a dream I saw and was speechless. Jim buried his head in his blanket, and then looking out, said, "It's a woman in a gray dress. Lord

deliver us! She's no living creature. Here, Smoker! Hector!"

'These were two kangaroo dogs, favourites of my companion. Like many of their kind they were fierce and bold, not particular about the quarry upon which they were loosed. "They come of old Hughes's breed," Jim used to say; "and the story goes, they killed and ate a traveller one day at Warragundra. There's no doubt about their eating him; as to killing him, of course, that was not so easy to know about; but man or beast, dog or devil, I'll warrant they go at the throat and hang on like bulldogs—they have a strain of that in 'em." So, a wild fancy, half involuntary, took him to watch them as they approached the figure, which was hurrying down the steep bank before us. *The dogs went a pace or two, and, howling, came back to us for protection.*

'"It's no living thing," said Jim, "or those dogs would never behave like that!", and he wrapped his head in the blankets and refused to look more.

'I looked steadily at the shadowy figure that, with a hurried, yet floating motion, descended the water path. The height, the air, the gliding step, all were alike. Whom did it resemble but *her?* As she reached the turn in the rocky hillside where I had first beheld her, the moon cleft a path through the sullen cloud-masses, and her light fell for one instant upon the Appearance. I saw the yellow hair, the pale face, the horror-stricken eyes of my old playmate —my old love, I may as well say so. I fancied she looked towards me with a reproachful look. I uttered a cry. The shape passed swiftly on down the path to the sullen pond. "The moonbeam strook

and deepest night fell down upon the heath," as Sir Walter Scott says, and Jim and I were left gazing upon the sights and listening to the sounds of an Australian forest.

'"There's been murder done here!" said Jim. "May her poor soul rest in peace!" I answered.'

'Amen to that!' said both the Elliots solemnly, as they rose with one impulse and shook Countem-out's brown sinewy hand.

'Thank you, thank you both,' said he. 'I've opened my heart to-night as I haven't done for many a year. And now I'll have an hour's sleep, and get away to the back at daylight. Cannibal's in the stable and pretty fit. Good-night.'

He strode off. At daylight Gilbert looked through his open bedroom window, and saw the overseer lead the great raking roan out of the stable, light his pipe, and ride away through the pouring monotonous rain. He saw the roan send up the mud in a shower with the first dash of his powerful hind-quarters, and watched until horse and rider disappeared across the river flat.

'Thank God for the rain, anyhow!' he said, as he turned over on his pillow, and prepared for additional slumber. 'If this lasts the twenty-four hours through, *the drought is over!*'

. . . . . .

The drought *was* over. Within that week fell more rain than had fallen during the whole previous year. That quantity was little more than six inches. Though not sufficient for a year, it was pretty well for a week, and Riverina, with Lower Warroo, Outerback Jandra, and all the wilds of the inmost

deserts, was moistened to a degree which suited its thirsty nature 'all to pieces,' as the men said. The herbage grew as in a greenhouse. The sheep at once were sent 'back,' water being abundant, and quitted the bare frontages. The mild climate prevented the stock from suffering from the rain, as might have chanced in a colder territory. In little more than a week Mr. Countemout reported the whole of the sheep as 'kicking up their heels,' and from that hour they improved uninterruptedly. Seasonable rains followed. The long agony of the drought was over, the battle was won.

Mr. Delafield's sheep came back in six weeks, half fat, and with patches of wool off, by reason of their sudden increase of flesh. Jack Bulmer's thirty thousand came down like the hosts of proud Sennacherib. Peace and plenty reigned in the land, so lately abandoned to famine and despair.

The next season was equally as good. Stock, wool, all squatting property, rose in value, until the old prices—long derided by the croakers—were reached.

The Messrs. Elliot Brothers in a few years sold Wandaroona with sixty-three thousand sheep, having bought and fenced more country. They then departed to the land of their forefathers, and the last news was, that Hobbie had killed, in the river that runs by the ancestral home of the great Border family of the Elliots, more salmon to his own rod than any man had been known to do for two seasons.

THE GOVERNESS OF THE POETS

CHAPTER I

I WAS young—that is, twenty-three—healthy, active, well-bred, and well-taught—if it comes to that. I had been carefully educated. Almost too well, in a partial great-aunt's opinion—there hardly being a sphere in the colonies (as she remarked) for a girl of so high an order of culture. I thought her singularly wrong, but did not say so. I plume myself on my tact—a nicely balanced faculty which I try not to let degenerate into dissimulation. There are so many disagreeable things you need not say, or indeed do. But, on reflection, I partly agreed with her. I was, apparently, of the nature of a superfluity. Nobody wanted me, it would seem, for I was not sought in marriage with any amount of eagerness. I was not bad-looking either, though equally far—perhaps a little farther—from being a beauty. I had a well-set-up, well-developed figure. I could ride well, and walk too, if necessary. And I always found it necessary in cold weather, or indeed in any weather, when there was not much to do. It helps the general tone, and improves—yes—the temper, mightily. People with thick boots, and the sense to wear them, generally have even tempers. If they get into a pet, as the best of

people do sometimes, there is no such complete way of getting rid of the uncomfortable, unchristian mood as by walking it off. No matter how hot, how cold, how wet, how windy, go out and half-tire yourself before you turn homeward. You can change your *chaussure*, you can hang up your waterproof; then you will find yourself in a calm, tolerant, forgiving mood, unknown to people who stick in the house.

From this slight digression it might be inferred that I am fond of exertion. So I am. I like real downright hard work, or exercise of any kind. But I dislike worry, or that kind of half-and-half maddening, unending struggle which some people contrive to spread more or less thickly over their whole lives. Muddle is neither one thing nor the other; it degrades the woman and infuriates the man. I like work, as I said before. I also like repose. I appreciate to the depths of my being the luxurious feeling of the day's work, or the week's work, being put away and done with until a specified and regulated time. I like to be free to read or think, write letters, or do ridiculous fancy work. I can't quite justify *that*, but I suppose it's an inherited tendency from the days when we used to weave shells and feathers into chaplets, aprons, and such like primitive precursors of millinery. Yes! I like to be free to follow my bent, or do nothing at all, when the day's work is over. If there's anything I detest, it's being asked to do something useful out of working hours. At the same time, let me not be misunderstood; I must have work, hardish work, bordering on self-sacrifice, amounting to mortification

of the flesh. Sheer idleness I simply abhor. Now, all my life I have found a difficulty in choosing the kind of work that was most morally healthful to me. To do without work altogether, I can honestly say, never occurred to me in this twenty-three-year-old life of mine.

Most people are obliged to work. I always think it settles the question so nicely for them—saves a world of indecision and trouble, which last is another word for distilled misery. I, unluckily, am not in any way obliged to work, otherwise than by this restless nature of mine, backed up by a ruthless conscience which seldom lets me alone for long. I wonder if everybody is driven about in the same fashion?

Ever since I can remember it has been my lot. I find myself appealing, too, against what are called the 'dictates of conscience,' which makes matters worse.

If I had been an advanced ritualist, all this would have been practically settled for me. I should have been told, more or less paternally, 'Dear child, you are to do this, or abstain from that, to believe this, to condemn that'; and, after a certain number of acts and deeds, recitals and repetitions, said more or less sleepily or hysterically, I should have been absolved and set finally right. But by whom? By my fellow-man, who tells me that he has power to loose and to bind, to save and to condemn — to wield, in fact, all the dread powers inextricably mingled with our mysterious human existence.

No! thrice no! I have been gifted, happily for

me or otherwise, with an intellect. That intellect has been, perhaps imprudently, cultivated from childhood. I have inherited a tendency to weigh evidence, with the obligation to abide by logical proof, though I am a woman. So I distrust mere assertion, and am prone to deny conclusions which do not proceed from the grounds stated.

If I am to hand myself over hand and foot to a belief, it must possess the sanction of my own freely exercised judgment, and not the mere sounding threat of 'authority.'

We—that is, our family is—no, that won't do ; the Middletons are so comfortably off, that there is but little inducement to 'work and labour truly,' as says the dear old Catechism.

'Our own living' was got for us a generation or two back by a grandfather, whom, unhappily, I only of all the brothers and sisters appear to resemble. His unresting energy caused him to despise his own land and home, brought him out to Australia, and drove him over land and sea in search of the fortune which he captured, and we enjoy, or at least possess.

There is now no need of making any more fortune, and indeed father grumbles much at times at the labour cast upon him in merely keeping what we have got. On that, or on a variety of small cares and trifling tastes, the most serious of which is connected with the menu, he occupies his life. Mother's responsibility is even greater, with reference to the dinner ; certainly more than half her waking thoughts are connected with cooks and relate to dinners, which she has come to hate, as less calculated to nourish than to rack and torment the human

frame. She, good, easy soul, would like to spend all her days in reading, sleeping, and the established family tasks. A six-o'clock tea, with her share of the children's dinner, would be her ideal of happiness here below. This she is not permitted to dream of, and possibly never will enjoy. It is wicked, I know, but I think if anything happened to father, she would make some excuse of economy, and send away the professed cook at once. We should have a series of picnic lunches and tea-dinners for a year to come.

I have three brothers and two sisters. The boys are in banks and offices, or making believe to learn to be squatters. They require no aid. My sisters are not imperfect variations of what dear mother must have been at their age. Both pretty and soft-looking, easy-tempered, and unambitious, not to say lazy, but in a graceful and lady-like way. They are perfectly satisfied with their lives.

They think everything 'so nice,' and wonder that dear Portia should worry herself so about things which really do not matter. What were such questions to them? They had everything they wanted, and really it seemed ungrateful to Providence to be dissatisfied.

They felt and acted according to their natures. I was impelled by mine almost from my birth, for there were nursery traditions of my revolutionary tendencies. I ought to have been the eldest son; then I should have had scope for the wildest vagaries, for any at least that tended towards money-making.

But with girls, once threaten departure from the beaten way, and you are driven back by the word and the idea, 'improper, unfeminine,' thrown at you

like a stone at a dog that enters a forbidden avenue. It does seem hard that, with the utmost cleanliness of purpose, a woman should be always liable to have her robe smudged or calumny-spotted directly her feet move out of the beaten path—the dusty, prosaic highway of society.

However, in spite of disapproval and the dead-weight of family remonstrance, I held to my determination to seek out some sort of work under the sun whereby I might do good to others, or even to myself. I must say I thought myself and my own character perfectly legitimate objects of sympathy. I wanted experience—knowledge of the good and evil of life,—much the same, I suppose, as men often wish for, and of course contrive to procure—so unfair is the measure of criticism meted out to either sex. I had no family duties to neglect; that was one good thing. My mother's health was excellent. My father had no hour of the day unoccupied in his solemn round of trivialities. My sisters supplied the exact kind of sympathy, assistance, and conversation that was needed. Our household possessed the unvarying comfort, not to say luxury, of a club. There was nothing to desire, nothing to complain of, nothing to wish changed, nothing, in my mind, to fill the heart, to satisfy the soul.

Ere my teens were passed I had resolved to find work, and to grind down my unrest upon it, if such could be.

I tried the poor, whom we are told we shall have always with us. There were years in Melbourne when the poor, in any true sense of the word, were wondrous hard to find. The sick, being

continuous and plentiful, were more satisfactory subjects.

I generally found that the poverty, if admitted, which was rarely the case, was of a temporary and ephemeral nature, mostly brought on by the dissipation of the head of the family, who was, at that moment perhaps, concluding a bout of revelry which had cost as much as his bread and meat bill for a quarter.

Then came a week or two of repentance and starvation, the culprit performing the repentance, and his wife and children the starvation, after which he resumed highly paid labour, and his family was floated out into wasteful plenty and forgetfulness of benefits.

I commenced finally to perceive that I was acting as a kind of Inebriate Assurance Company, my benefactions merely enabling my infirm clients to afford another bout or more yearly, inasmuch as they could rely on my support of the family when *in extremis*.

As for the sick, I tended them in their homes, truly and loyally, through many a hot summer day and sleety winter eve. Then I brought home an infectious fever, which imperilled not only my own life but those of others, upon which my father aroused himself and, using his tardily-executed authority, forbade visitations. 'There are asylums and institutions to which I subscribe,' he said, 'as did my father before me. They take in, not only everybody who is sick, but everybody who is worn out or troubled with unconquerable dislike to labour. Every kind of comfort, medical and otherwise, is lavished on them.

Hospital nurses, often young ladies who, like you, are tired of their lives and disdainful of their families, wait upon them to their heart's content. I am *not* going to have my house turned into a fever ward, and I think I have reason for what I say.'

I didn't think it was in him. I went over and kissed father with more tenderness than I remember feeling for years.

We people who talk a good deal and demonstrate our feelings freely forget, perhaps, that other people think and feel not less intensely.

'You are quite right, father,' said I. 'I submit, and beg pardon for anything in my conduct that may have appeared unkind. It *really* was not in my heart; now, could it have been, my dear old daddy?'

'I'm sure it wasn't, my darling; but, dear me, why any daughter of mine should have so much superfluous energy I can't think. What's the use of it, except to drive themselves and other people distracted. Can't you keep still and enjoy all your home comforts? You are fond of reading—order a box of new books from Mullen's once a week if you like. I'll buy you a pair of ponies and a phaeton, a new hackney; anything in the wide world, if you'll only keep still and let other people rest in peace and quietness.'

'If I'll only sit on a stool all day and be a good child, you mean, father?'

'And that you never could do in your life, I'll answer for it,' said mother, arousing herself and shutting up her novel; 'though really *why* you shouldn't have taken after me, or your dear father, I

can't think. Still, my dear, there are plenty of things to do, which a young lady might, with perfect correctness, devote herself to.'

'I don't seem to find them,' I answer wearily. 'I have tried many things, and they don't satisfy me or you either. I suppose you wouldn't like me to become a lay sister like Martha Fletcher?'

'These sisterhoods do a great deal of good,' my mother said reflectively, as if the question had but that moment suggested itself, 'but I cannot say that I approve of young girls separating themselves completely from their natural counsellors, their parents and relatives; any work of charity can be equally well performed with the sanction of their best earthly friends.'

'But I seem to have no place or use in life,' I said. 'I am sick to death of the daily routine, and feel at times like the French stage-driver, who blew out his brains because he saw himself driving along the same road every day for years to come. Oh, if I could only do some real good!' Here—it was unphilosophical, I confess, but—I began to cry.

Mother got up, drew me over to her, and put her arms round me, and took me tenderly to her comforting bosom.

'You are only out of sorts, my child,' she said. 'I do not think you ever got over that nasty fever; *you want a change*, don't you think so, dear father? She takes after you a little, you know, and can't bear too much sameness' (I trust that pious—white whatsyname—tarradiddle will never endanger dear mother's future bliss). 'You must take a nice trip somewhere—and—dear me! only think now' (this

was mother's strongest asseveration), 'this very day I had a letter from poor Jane Quartzman, full of complaints and despair and rather hinting about help.'

'What does she want?' I say cynically; 'hasn't she got a husband and family, a home, and all the rest of it? She must have plenty of occupation.'

'You seem to dwell upon occupation as an alderman does upon appetite,' said my father, rather neatly for him. (I suspect father occasionally of resembling the sailor's monkey, who won't talk lest he should be made to work.) 'Do you suppose there are no people who have not too much occupation and too little rest?'

'Can't imagine it,' I say. 'But what about Jane?'

'She has seven children,' he said, 'the eldest a girl of fifteen. Quartzman lost his money in a justifiable but unlucky speculation. They cannot afford a governess, so, as she says, the children are growing up in ignorance. She herself has wretched health, and with all the wish for exertion breaks down miserably every now and then. Quartzman is a good fellow and clever, but bad luck and hard work have left him worse off than he was twenty years ago; he has a store now somewhere near Waronga.'

'Poor thing—poor thing!' mother says mechanically, looking round at our extremely comfortable, not to say luxurious apartment,—papa's easy-chair, with the week's papers beside it in a species of portfolio, his reading-lamp and table arranged to the

inch, and graduated to his eyesight; mother's lovely general repository, out of which she constructs the needlework web which represents her life; the girls' ottomans, print-stands, china-shelves, fern-baskets—everything perfect in taste and harmonious in grouping.

'Yes, very dreadful, isn't it?' says father, reaching for the *Australasian*, and turning his lamp up with exactitude. 'I always wonder why people *will marry* with insufficient means.'

'I often wonder why they marry at all,' I say, 'judging from the limited measure of happiness it seems to secure; but that is hardly the question, is it? There will always be the poor, the Bible says, even if our relations did not impress that fact upon us. The problem is, how to help them?'

'It's no use sending them money,' says father, with decision. 'Quartzman gets to the end of it somehow, and in six months is as badly off as ever.'

'I didn't mean *that*,' I said. 'It's the worst kind of help I know, though no other will do at times. What they want is some one to organise the household, who isn't sick or nervous, like Cousin Jane, or worried with bills and worn out with work, like her husband,—a kind of benevolent free-lance. I really think *I* shall go and teach their children for a year, and if that does not mortify the flesh to some purpose, I am a Maori girl.'

My mother ran her needle into her finger, thus accentuating her next remark. 'Portia, love, you are not going deranged!—are you sure, dear child?'

Father dropped the newspaper and stared at me.

The other girls jumped up and said, 'Oh, Portia, you don't say so! Just like a regular governess! And fancy—think what people will say!'

'My darling,' said mother, again; 'you cannot have considered what you are saying; leaving your family and going among comparative strangers; such a distance too!'

'And to think of going into the bush — the horrid, rough, far-away bush!' said Jessie.

'I daresay they dine in the middle of the day and have a general servant,' remarked Isabella.

Father had been kept so long waiting—indeed prevented from making his remark, which from its rarity was always listened to with respect, that he must have become nettled, for he said—

'I see nothing whatever to be astonished at. After all, Quartzman is a gentleman, and his wife was as nice a creature as I ever saw in her early days; so pretty too! He has had bad luck—some one must have their share of that in this world. I think Portia's proposal rather Quixotic, but it's no worse than strumming a piano all day, or turning oneself into a sewing-machine, or playing at nuns and nunneries with an Anglican curate for director. As for being a governess, not so many people have the pluck, patience, and brains required for *that* sort of fancy-work. I see *nothing* to be astonished at. Portia can go to Waronga by rail in eight or nine hours. And the bush is by no means bad in its way or the people either. So, there now!'

It was 'there now' indeed. Very rarely did father so far commit the indiscretion of getting into a decent pet. Of course, like women, we admired

him all the more for it. I saw that my project was secure. It was far too much trouble to father to make up his mind, for him to think of changing it again. Mother and the girls looked awe-stricken.

I clinched the opportunity by saying, 'Mother dear, it will be a real charity to help the poor, overworked, feeble soul, will it not? Then the work and change will do me good. I was *seriously* thinking of going for a nurse's place at the new infirmary. This will serve instead. I shall do something more erratic if I stay at home. You had better give me your blessing and let me go. A year soon passes.'

'But a year is so dreadfully long,' pleaded poor mother.

'Nonsense, my dear!' said father, who now began to take all the credit to himself for the proposal: 'Portia is not bound to stay a month if she doesn't wish. You can go up and see her and take one of the girls any time. Why, *I* could go up myself if that was all!'

We all laughed at this. Father had gradually given up visiting any of his properties that lay more than fifty miles away from Melbourne, and had not slept a night away from home for years; but he evidently thirsted to distinguish himself in that way again. Enterprise is contagious. We were clearly to be partners in this wild adventure.

'To be sure you could, daddy! Why not go up with me?'

'Well—er—perhaps—we'll see.'

When father got to that stage, I could generally

get anything I wanted. So I made my preparations accordingly. I packed up a carefully picked general assortment of utility wearables, including some unapproachable walking-boots. I commanded mother to write to Cousin Jane, telling her that I was coming up for a year for change of air; that town life had undermined my health; that if she would give me room and bread and butter, I would teach the children and help her generally with her house and needle-work. But that it was a crotchet of mine that I was to be styled and known as Miss Middleton the new governess, and *not* as a relation. That unless she fully and solemnly acceded to this, I would not come. 'Tell her I'm a little eccentric in some things—mad, if you like, mother,' said I. 'That will account for any girl choosing to be rated as governess rather than visitor. And tell her to reply by telegram. I *can't* endure suspense just now.'

Next day came the message—'Come by all means—delighted. John meet you Redgum.—JANE QUARTZMAN.'

So that was settled; nothing remained but to say good-bye. Nothing more than that. To bid farewell to the kind hearts that had loved and cherished me all my life; that had borne with my fancies and freaks; had watched fondly over the growth and what they deemed the improvement of body and mind; wept at my childish ailments and agonised over serious illness; that had never consciously done me wrong or injustice since the day of my birth! Where should I find better friends than these? Yet I was going to make the attempt far away,

among comparative strangers! No wonder that I found it hard to say good-bye, and nearly broke down ignominiously, to the amazement of my sisters, who believed implicitly in Portia's adamantine firmness and pitiless resolution.

'She must be ill, *very* ill, Jessie!' said Isabella, the youngest. 'I saw the tears in her eyes. Do you think her mind is going? That is what makes her so restless, perhaps?'

. . . . . .

Partings are got over somehow. I respected my dear easy-going mother more in that five minutes of love and grief than I had done for years previously. 'Work as hard as you like, dear,' she said, 'consistently with health, but, mind, I trust my girl to avoid anything unconventional. A man may do what he likes' ('I have heard that before,' I said through my tears, 'and don't believe it'), 'but a woman is bound by every principle of honour and feeling of delicacy to do nothing that may raise a question as to her character for modesty,—I do not say may injure, but may cause gossip or sneering comment. The bare supposition of indiscretion is of itself an evil which a whole future life may be powerless to repair.'

'And a great shame it is,' sobbed I, 'that every woman should have a millstone round her neck in the way of a ridiculously over-weighted Theory of Propriety, that a slip from a stepping-stone in the shallowest brook may drown her; while men float luxuriously over seas of delightful mystery and danger. But you may trust my father's daughter and yours, mother,' I said, throwing my arms round

her neck, 'to do you no discredit in word and deed; though she may have ideas that seem advanced, her conduct will be as prudent as Mrs. Hannah More herself could desire. Till I return, of course, that is understood; then I may choose to go in for a few well-earned imprudences.'

CHAPTER II

RAILWAY journeyings are supposed to be much alike. But when father and I were fairly off, the smooth steady rush of the iron steed over hill and dale, forest and plain, calmed my excited nerves and swelling heart. Once in a way it is delicious to get clean away from your old life—to make a fresh departure. You leave behind Tradition and Routine, and are charmed to behold the faint but grand outlines of Adventure and Romance. To me, change had always been another name for enjoyment. Even my ordinarily placid parent was roused into a congenial mood. He commenced to tell of half-forgotten feats and successes of his youth, ere a fatal plenitude of the world's goods had fixed the doom of indolence and unreadiness upon his after life. The day passed pleasantly enough. The sun was gradually, wearily westering, as if even *he* felt it tedious in the provinces, when the train commenced to slow down and finally stopped at a terminus, the whole aspect of which was so palpably characteristic that I involuntarily murmured 'Sleepy Hollow!'

Everything was unmistakably countrified, from the men and women who came confessedly to stare

at arriving strangers, to the horses, buggies, and other vehicles which awaited guests and travellers; I could not help smiling at the sudden incongruity with the sternly fashionable metropolis I had left but eight hours before.

'I hope Quartzman has come to meet us,' said my father. 'Likely enough to mistake the day. Oh, here he is; how are you, old fellow?'

This unusually florid greeting, for father, was addressed to a tallish, dark, spare man, who hastily advanced through the crowding people, having on his face that look of concentrated welcome with which a dweller in the wilderness greets a guest from the city. Why metropolitan visitors should be considered especially valuable I can't say. I don't know that their intrinsic worth is so stupendous. But such is the case. Probably novelty of form and idea is the exciting cause. When the guest is wealthy, the welcome is intensified; even the best of men and women add fervour to the glance or hand-clasp with which the pecuniarily fortunate individual is welcomed.

I looked narrowly at my cousin's husband, whom I had not seen since childhood. The face was kindly and intelligent, though worn with anxiety; the man a gentleman too, beyond doubt, in spite of old-fashioned garments and a shabby hat. 'So this is Portia?' he said, shaking me warmly by the hand. 'You are the best of girls for coming, though what you can see in a household crowded with children, in an out-of-the-way part of the world, I can't imagine.'

'A pleasant change of scene and occupation,'

said I hastily. 'But we shall find out all about each other before you get rid of me.'

'Well, we shan't starve you, and we have plenty of fresh air; I can promise so much. But have *you* turned romantic, Godfrey? You haven't been across the Campaspe for ages, have you now? Give me your portmanteau, there stands the buggy.'

Packed into a faded elderly vehicle, which looked as if it should not have claimed kinship with anything American, we departed along a dusty track. The horses, however rough in coat and high in bone, were better than they looked, for we rattled briskly over the four miles which intervened between the terminus and the township of Waronga.

It was dusk when we drove down the main street of the bush township, halting at a gate which led through a small garden to a plain weatherboard cottage. The noise of the wheels brought out the mistress of the house; she stood in the verandah with a baby in her arms, half a dozen children crowded through the gate for close inspection of the new arrivals.

'Harriet, this is Miss Middleton,' said Mr. Quartzman to a tall untidy girl of sixteen in a print dress. 'Show her at once to her room, she is tired after the journey. Charlie, take the horses and let them go.' The boy drove off with the buggy, while we followed our host inside, father wearing a half-distrustful expression, as if prepared for whatever might happen. Wicked old parent! did I not know that there was in his heart an unholy joy, in that he would be

compelled to leave on the next day, or, at farthest, the day following?

Cousin Jane apologised for not coming farther than the verandah, on the score of dear baby's teething, which necessitated caution as to taking cold. But that she was unaffectedly glad to see me was evident from the childishly pleased tone of her voice. At the same time she partly distrusted me as an inhabitant of cities, whose habitudes might lead me to be contemptuous of provincial ways. From the babe in her arms to the unformed girl who stood staring placidly, there seemed to be a graduated scale of continuous childhood, all in a state of eager curiosity. Their maternal parent was in complexion fair and an erstwhile pretty woman. But long years of warfare with indifferent servants or muddling with none at all, of contracted or rude lodging, of anxiety about matters of money, with total denial of social advantages, had written their record in enduring characters upon every feature. It was not so much an expression of suffering as the ever-present necessity to 'take heed for the morrow,' to obey some household summons ringing in her ears, that gave a painful tone to the facial expression. She was well millinered, but evidently for the occasion. Her silk dress had seen service, but was still effective. An extra ribbon or two, with a scrap of good lace, had completed her preparation. Had the look of unrest been absent from her face, she would still have been fair to look upon. But she was evidently incapable of abstracting her mind from the catalogue of household ills, one or another of which momentarily assailed her.

'Delighted to see you, Miss Middleton,' said she, with a meaning look. 'I hardly thought we should be so fortunate as to get you after all. You will have to put up with all kinds of things, and excuse our bush ways, but we will do our best to make you comfortable and happy too, though I feel one is as little in our power as the other in this terrible out-of-the-way place.

'Ethel! *do* go into the kitchen and see if Mary is ready to send up tea, and Susan—where's Susan, that she has not come to put you little ones to bed? John, you might have taken Mr. Middleton to his room before this; I am sure he must be awfully tired. There will be just time for him to wash his hands before the bell rings, and when I'm to get this baby out of my hands I really don't know. It seems to me that I'm expected to do half my servants' work in every department.'

All this was said in a sweet-toned, monotonous, complaining voice. Before I had done speculating as to whether, under any circumstances of marriage, however disastrous, I should publish such an official catalogue of my household exigencies, a rapid dispersion of the family took place. The baby was captured, all unwilling, and carried off by a servant. Father was judiciously provided by his host with a glass of brandy-and-water, which acted in a strictly medicinal sense after the toils of the day, enabling him to dress with comparative comfort. In my room, which was very neat, there was a vase with lovely flowers on the table, and when we came in to tea, that meal was served in an appetising and generous fashion, which caused us both some little surprise.

Ushered into a small but by no means uncomfortable dining-room, the tea-dinner was certainly good of its kind. We did ample justice to it. Travelling sharpens the appetite as well as the wits. The chickens were tender and well cooked ; the sweets were Jane's own composition ; a bottle of light wine, from a celebrated vineyard hard by, soothed and satisfied father. The tea was excellent, which *soothed* me. The whole thing being such a success, I began to ask myself why such people are called unfortunate, and have to be pitied.

After the pangs were allayed, and the observing faculty got into range again, I thought I descried a reason. We were assisting at an effort. I could see in the anxious face of my hostess a score of struggles, small and great, which the entertainment had cost her. I tracked the cause of inward disquiet, from the first start she gave when the parlour-maid appeared with a message and without the soup, to the stony despair which commenced to settle on her face when the second course hung fire a few minutes, and, for all she knew, might never make its appearance at all.

Mr. Quartzman talked amusingly, producing literary and other materials for conversation, which interested father and me. But ever and again would come a look upon his face, as if his thoughts had taken unbidden flight to a region of sordid cares, with bills and promissory notes hovering vulture-like over the peace of home. I had been only too closely enwrapt in security and repose. These people scarcely knew what it was to have an hour free from care—from the galling pressure of poverty.

Next day father made a shameless excuse and went away, so I was left alone with my new friends and new duties. He and Mr. Quartzman had a longish talk before Charlie drove him over to the station, and I could not help fancying that some of the lines of that thoughtful countenance were temporarily smoothed out.

Breakfast over, I proposed to have a serious talk with Mrs. Quartzman, as I resolved to call her forthwith, lest our relationship might leak out through the incautious use of Christian names. There is nothing like having a clear, rigidly-defined understanding at first. Why *will* not people accept this most obvious truth? What a world of losses and crosses, failures and recriminations, it would save!

Dressed in a dark, close-fitting stuff, with the plainest of cuffs and collars, I flatter myself that I looked like what I meant—work in its most uncompromising aspect.

I had prepared myself for the important interview by rehearsing my part. My cousin looked gratified when I entered her sitting-room (it would have been a mockery to call it a drawing-room, though they had the comfort, not invariable in Australian country dwellings of the smaller sort, of a separate apartment for feeding purposes). She raised herself from the sofa on which she was reclining, in company with a large basket filled with stockings of all sizes, colours, and degrees of continuity.

'Oh, my dear Portia! I *am* so glad to have the chance of a good talk with you, now that John has gone out for the day. I never can get him to enter into things with me, and there is so much for me to

think about, or else I don't know really what would become of the place and the poor children. Isn't it a curious thing that men don't take an interest in what ought to concern them quite as much as it does women? Now *we* are always ready to talk about household matters day or night, and why shouldn't they be? But no; though I don't say that John isn't a good husband, and does all he can, poor fellow, for his family, yet he's more interested in something that goes on at the other end of the world, or in these bothering politics that always seem to me to be exactly the same whoever is in or whoever is out. Indeed, when he comes home at night he often seems tired and worn out, and yet gets quite cross if I begin to tell him anything about the servants or the children, or ask him how we are to manage for the next month's butcher's and baker's bills. I always tell him that if he'd give his mind to these little matters when he came home at night, instead of reading useless books and smoking, it would make a wonderful difference in the way we have to live.'

While my distressed relative was running on with these somewhat disjointed remarks, I was prevented from stopping her and commencing the clear-cut statement which I had prepared for her benefit.

My mind *would* revert to a passage in my very early life, when the worn matron before me, with her faded apparel and mental attributes similarly threadbare—it appeared to me—had been our guest for a short time. Such a pretty, sweet young woman, bright with the freshness and high spirits of early youth. I still retained a vivid mental picture of

her. How I stood with childish envy admiring her dressed for a ball!—a vision of loveliness, with her fairy-like, floating dress, her dazzling ornaments, her snowy neck and arms. And was this—*could* this be really the same human creature—this faded, feeble, querulous woman, nearly as empty of all but the most primitive ideas as a sawdust doll; who had so nearly lost all trace of beauty, and who gently whined because her ill-fated husband, at the end of the day's conflict with care and customers, revolted from her catalogue of broken plates and domestic shortcomings?

I remembered mother's saying that 'poor Jane had been a bit of a flirt' in her ephemeral butterfly span. Full permission to have indulged in that agreeable, if hazardous pastime, had she from me, when I thought of her long after years of struggle and privation. 'Doubtless,' mused I, 'she was the unthinking, uncultivated flirt of the period, graceful of mien and winning of manner, as are often the outward presentments of the "fair woman without discretion," whom so few, wisely prescient, are found to condemn. And now that I am brought face to face with results, I can peer over the moral grave into which, in after life, the woman wholly devoid of intellectual culture must perforce descend.'

Before I commenced my siege operations I made a leisurely reconnaissance, and calculated my range, so to speak. With all her emptiness and inconsequence of talk, I thought I could perceive that the even temper, which had been one of her early attractions, had not wholly deserted her. It may be a small matter in the eye of the moral analyst this

half-instinctive, chiefly material endowment, yet is it a wondrous factor in domestic happiness. Sorrow, poverty, care, had rubbed off the gloss—no doubt had imparted an occasional acerbity—but the half-childish power of frank acknowledgment of error, of generous sympathy with the good fortune of others, was still there—still capable of shining brightly with judicious burnishing. Better again, there were some poor remnants of the girlish graces of long ago in the attenuated face and form. Could any human care and skill renovate the worn outlines, 'the light of those eyes relume'? It would be a good deed, an exciting task. It was well worth a trial, and success in such a case would outweigh, in my eyes, the conversion of all the heathen from Natal to the source of the Umbelitza.

The deck being thus mentally clear for action, I grappled, and, so to speak, boarded at once. 'Mrs. Quartzman,' I said. 'Now, don't look hurt or surprised, because it's part of my plan, and I am not going to call you anything else, for reasons of my own, while I am here. Just answer me a few questions, after which I will explain myself fully. Do you think your children need teaching?'

'They are growing up in positive ignorance—I always tell John so,' she said. 'Harriet can hardly play the simplest tunes; Charlie is beginning to like bad companions; the little ones know nothing more than their letters. I try to teach them, indeed I do. But you see what making and mending I have to do. When I look at Harriet, and think what mamma and papa had paid for me at her age, I often cry by the hour over it.'

'That answers my question,' I said; 'now, can you afford to pay a qualified governess?'

'We can hardly pay Mary Anne's and Susan's wages as it is,' said she piteously; 'how then could we afford a good governess's salary?'

'Very well answered,' I said; 'now for number three—if I teach the children English, French, and music, with a little Latin for Charlie, keep them out of harm's way, and help you with your mending and dressmaking for a year, would that be an advantage to you?'

'If you can do this, and live contentedly in our poor house, with our dull ways, you will be to us as an angel from heaven,' sobbed poor Jane, with her handkerchief to her eyes. 'It's too good to be true.'

'I will guarantee to do this and more without fee or reward, chiefly because you are my relation, whom I think it is a duty and pleasure to help,' said I, with an unsmiling face, 'but on conditions, and these you and your husband must pledge yourself to observe.'

'I was going to say we would promise anything,' she said, 'but I know John likes to look before he leaps, and will want to hear what they are, so I can only promise and vow on my own account, and declare that you shall have the utmost respect paid you in all ways, and will be to us as a daughter of the house.'

'That is just what I should prefer not to be, Mrs. Quartzman,' said I, 'so let me at once, and for ever, give you my opinions and price list. In the first place, I wish to be known to your visitors only as

Miss Middleton, the governess engaged for a year. These facts are literally true, you need only suppress the information that I am your relative, and do not receive a salary.'

'But why object to let the real facts be known, my dear, when they are all to your credit?'

'That is my affair, Cousin Jane,' said I; 'one of my reasons is that I prefer only to appear in connection with my work—and, between you and me, I foresee plenty of it before me. I don't think you will find fault, but I wish to do everything my own way. I am well-meaning, but rather obstinate. However, you must take the good with the bad. You can spare me the lumber-room to teach in. Harriet might share my bedroom, it will be a mutual advantage. And now, will you kindly call in the children and solemnly hand them over, with the injunction that I am to be strictly obeyed in *everything*, whether in school tasks or otherwise.'

This was done; much emphasis being laid on the fact that Miss Middleton would 'bring them on' in a surprising manner, if they were only sensible enough to be guided for their good, and that she had been kind enough to take full charge of them, both in and out of school.

The children looked astonished at this, but the novelty of the situation had charms for them, and they retired with gratification visible on their countenances. Charlie alone lingered, and presently said, 'Miss Middleton, do you know Latin and Euclid?'

'Yes, Charlie, a little of both; if you work

steadily with me, I promise you that you will not be called a dunce when you go to school.'

'I am so glad of that. You are a regular brick, I believe, Miss Middleton.'

After this day I took 'full charge,' as Cousin Jane expressed it, of my young kinsfolk, and addressed myself to my arduous task with great earnestness of purpose. My work was 'cut out for me,' as Charlie said in his boyish slang.

'My word, Miss Middleton! it will give you fits; I hope you'll be strong enough for the place, for I like the look of you awfully.'

'And I like you, Charlie,' said I; 'so I trust you to give me all the help you can in dealing with your brothers and sisters, and performing the task that you say is so difficult.'

'Difficult!' he said; 'it's next door to impossible —only you're not like some governesses—girls are such donkeys generally. But just think of all you'll have to do; why, there's Harriet first of all—she's not a bad sort of girl, only awfully lazy and untidy; wants ever so much watching to make her do her own work, let alone getting the little ones to do theirs. You'll have to bully her to keep her room right, to come down to breakfast, to learn her lessons, and do her practising on the piano, which she never does, right on to the end, unless when I've got a headache. Then the little ones, careless little monkeys! Just like white Indians. I used to make them climb up a tree and sit there, and tell them I'd masthead them into a sense of their duty.'

'You've been reading one of Marryat's novels, Charlie,' said I; 'which was it?'

'How in the world did you guess that? Yes, *Peter Simple*—what a jolly story it is! I never enjoyed a book half so much before.'

'You are quite right, Charlie; have you read *Mr. Midshipman Easy?*'

'No; is that as good?'

'Better, and ever so much more fun, my brothers thought.'

'By George! you don't say so. Oh! how I should like to get it, but we never get new books here; father says he can't afford them.'

'Then listen to me; if you are a good boy, learn your Latin well, and set a good example to your brothers and sisters, I'll send to Melbourne for it for you.'

'Will you? you are a regular trump, Miss Middleton. But when? I shall be longing to read it.'

'Boys who are to grow up successful men ought to learn self-control,' say I gravely; 'suppose a month, or, perhaps'—noticing the unconscious elongation of his countenance—'the last day of this month, that's about three weeks. But, mind, not a line wrong with the Latin, and the arithmetic perfect.'

'Oh, Miss Middleton! oh, Miss Middleton! I'll work like a horse,' gasped out the boy, 'you see if I don't, and I'll coach the kids up too; I never thought I should like a governess so much.'

I had suggested to Cousin Jane that Harriet and I might share a room. I like comfort as much as most people, but was not sufficiently elderly to make a fuss about a bedroom to myself, in a manifestly small house. Besides, I intended to gain control over the eldest daughter, knowing how much of the

family well-doing depended upon her training at this critical juncture. Her mother was immensely relieved by this suggestion.

'Oh! if you only *would*,' she said, 'it would be such a good thing for Harriet; but her room is never fit to be seen, and how ever you, who are so orderly, will bear with her, I don't know.'

'I hope she will bear with me,' I said, 'for I shall have to make myself disagreeable at first. But we shall be good friends in the long run.'

'Harriet is a good girl, you know—in her way, that is,' said the mother, 'but between my not being strong enough to look after her, and her father being so fond of her, she has been a little spoiled. *I cannot* get her to keep her chest of drawers, or her dress, or indeed anything, tidy. Then, though she's very quick, she will only learn what she likes, and spends too much of her time in useless reading. I can do nothing with her, I've given her up.'

'I think I see a way to effect a change,' said I, wondering much how the querulous woman beside me expected to work beneficially upon the mind of youth, or to inculcate qualities, none of which she exhibited the faintest symptom of possessing in her own person.

CHAPTER III

THAT afternoon I devoted to a complete rearrangement of the humble apartment which was, jointly with my youthful cousin, to be my chief nightly abode. I sent off Charlie to buy me a hammer and a packet of tacks ; with these and a few nails I made a strong alteration in the carrying capacity of the room.

I enlisted Harriet as a volunteer assistant in the great task of unpacking and arranging my things, and, in the process, softened that young person's heart by the opportune gift of a few ribbons and a winter hat, which I had brought with me for the purpose. When all was completed, I glanced round approvingly and said—

'What a nice room! I'm sure we shall be so happy and comfortable in it. What do you say, Harriet?'

'I never thought it half so pretty before. These pictures of yours give it quite a new expression. It looked so dull and pokey always.'

'The expression of a room, as you happily put it, my dear, is in nearly all cases derived from the tastes and habits of the occupants. I hope this room will always express cleanliness, order, and

industry. Harriet, won't you try and keep up our reputation?

'I see what you mean,' she said, kissing me impulsively. 'But, indeed, everything seemed so hopeless that I had not the heart to try to be tidy or anything.'

'To-morrow morning, Harriet,' said I, with a look of mock severity, 'work commences, and Miss Middleton will meet her young friends at nine o'clock precisely. You see this travelling clock of mine is going well. I am a great stickler for punctuality in all things. I am afraid the one in the dining-room is not to be trusted; it must be seen to.'

'Nine o'clock! is not that *very* early? We shall hardly have finished breakfast.'

'Your mother told me that you breakfasted at eight, which gives a whole hour, *quite* sufficient for that meal and family prayers to be concluded in. Besides, everything will be ready in the schoolroom, so that not a moment need be wasted.'

'Who is to do that?'

'*You* will, I hope,' I said, looking at her steadily. 'I shall ask you to get up with me at six o'clock in the summer, and seven in winter. There will then be ample time for your piano practice before breakfast and the arrangement of the schoolroom.'

'But I hate getting up early, and there is so little to do before breakfast.'

'If you study or practise you will find the time pass quickly enough; you will have three hours and a half for steady work in the forenoon, and then, the

day's work being nearly completed, as it always is if people save every minute of their mornings, we can enjoy ourselves a little in the afternoon.'

'Enjoy ourselves! Miss Middleton, how can any one do that at Waronga?'

'You will see. There are many pleasures even in the country if people earn them by honest work, and take a little trouble to organise properly. Pleasure needs thought and perseverance to develop it, though it is not generally allowed.'

'*I* shouldn't have thought it for one,' said Harriet. 'I always supposed that half the battle was having nothing to do, and that pleasure came of itself, or next thing to it.'

'You will find that is a view not much carried out in real life. But I feel rather tired. I shall sleep well to-night, and that will be one pleasure at any rate.'

. . . . . .

My anticipation was verified. The sun was up next morning when I was awakened from a sound slumber. I arose at once, and, opening the window, looked out across the dim, gray-green, far-stretching forest, which monopolised the foreground, to the sombre purple mountain range, which the level sun-rays scarce irradiated. 'Get up, Harriet, at *once*,' said I, 'remember your good resolutions; don't parley with this enemy, but be ready to follow suit when I return from the bathroom.'

'Oh, oh dear!' said the unwilling girl, 'it's so frightfully early, but I promised, so I must; I suppose the water will be desperately cold. Oh, I wish I was energetic like you!'

I had urged an early retirement the night before, so the young, growing creature had received her full allowance of sleep.

Between the excitement of a new departure in her stereotyped life, and her desire to act up to her word, Harriet made a praiseworthy effort, and the giant was slain—for that day, for that day only, alas! He takes an awful amount of slaying, that most ancient giant, Sloth, whose joints, unlike his brothers of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, are by no means rusty.

When we were dressed and equipped for the day, on leaving our room (for upon that point I insisted) neatly arranged, so that little remained for the servant to do, I felt that we had commenced the week's work hopefully. There was just time for Harriet to superintend the breakfast table, to adjust a few flowers, to see that her father's favourite dish had not been forgotten, for me to glance over and note that everything was in order in the schoolroom, when eight o'clock sounded, and the breakfast was served.

I must here explain that between my senior pupils and the baby there were four intermediate elves calculated to alarm the timid instructor. Harold, a strong, resolute boy of twelve, with a preternaturally acute sense for all woodland sights and sounds, denizens, and products. Jenny, a mischievous romp of ten, in a permanent state of torn frock and dishevelled hair. Ethel, aged seven, was shy and quiet, but averse to control, it was stated; while Jack and Jill, as two bright-eyed, curly-pated outlaws had by common consent come to be called, owed no allegiance to any one, it seemed. They

passed their lives in repeating the traditional performance of their namesakes, and crying lustily in and out of season; dressed, washed, cuffed or lectured by any of the elder children to whom such tending might chance to be convenient. The baby was good-tempered, and so far a non-combatant.

These were, then, the raw material of the small regiment which I had guaranteed to bring into order and discipline. I did not despair. Indeed, strengthened by the pure, bright, bracing atmosphere, I felt eager to begin my task. Method was the one thing needful. And patience, what a mine of it I should require!

Still, when I thought of the alteration I could mentally foreshadow in the household, I seemed to hold on to my project with yet more tenacious grasp.

The first morning passed by no means tardily. The children, pleased with the unwonted excitement, worked steadily—the younger ones, receiving timely encouragement and explanation, were not too difficult. Fortunately for me, they were all highly intelligent, which quickness of apprehension made their tasks less irksome on both sides. As the hands of the clock moved towards half-past twelve, however, there was a universal feeling of relief and satisfaction. Jack and Jill had been consigned to the housemaid, who appeared on the scene at twelve precisely, to be washed and dressed for dinner, as also to enjoy pardonable recreation, that young woman informing the company of her conviction that they had never been so quiet and well behaved for three hours consecutively during their whole previous existence.

When I rejoined Cousin Jane, a few minutes before dinner, in company with Harriet, both of us specially prepared in dress for that repast, she cried out, 'Oh, my dear Miss Middleton! there has been quite a heavenly peace pervading the house this morning. The servants have gone about their work without being called off every minute. I've had a little time to sew and consider things; altogether, I feel as I haven't done for years.'

'Glad you like my government,' I said. 'I see my way to helping you more yet if you humour me by letting me have my own way in all things. If I am autocratic it will all be for a good end.'

'You may do and say anything in the wide world that you like in this house, if you can only go on as you have begun. John will think me a helpless dawdle—that is all. But I don't care as long as things move so delightfully. Now I wonder why *I* could not manage things like this?'

'Don't think me so awfully superior,' said I, touched by poor Jane's humility. 'I haven't half a dozen children and a weak back to pull me down. It is easy to do things when people feel as strong as I do now.'

'You are very good to say so; and nobody ever will know to my dying day what I've suffered with my back. Ach, ach, ach,—all day and all night for weeks. Men really don't consider women when they're ill half as much as they ought. I know John often thinks I make too much of my ailments. But if you knew all my feelings.'

'Never mind, my dear, you will have all your aches and pains coming back if you talk of them.

There's the dinner bell, I feel quite a wonderful appetite.'

The early dinner was announced—the regulation solid repast of the middle classes, not too well provided with the good things of this life. In a general way I had been accustomed to a late dinner, and enjoyed it as a restorative at the end of the day. One's spirit seemed loosened from its shackles, and was free to roam through the fair domain of fancy.

Then whatever there was of novelty, social or other experience, among the assembled guests, was displayed for the general enlivenment.

Far otherwise was the mid-day meal to which we were now bidden. Still, I could not but observe its perfect suitability to the circumstances of a large, indifferently provided family. The children made a hearty and wholesome repast—eating with appetite, and disposing of soup, meat, vegetables, and pudding with full and natural enjoyment; while their elders, ourselves, were secured against any serious injury for want of food for, I should say, the next twenty-four hours.

At two o'clock school was resumed and carried on, with more or less success, till four. I was surprised to find that the day scholastic had come to an end, by no means wearily, as far as I was concerned, either. But until every book and slate, pencil and pen was carefully bestowed in their various receptacles, the impatient children were not suffered to depart. I had discovered that method was the particular faculty wanting in the household, and this vitally necessary quality I was determined they should acquire, if I died for it.

Just before tea-time, when the autumn day was closing in, Mr. Quartzman made his appearance from his store, looking, I thought, worn and fagged. However, after making some slight change in his dress, he appeared at the tea-table much brightened up, and apparently disposed to comport himself in a sociable manner, striving to throw off, if possible, a portion of the burden of care which, like Christian in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, he bore about with him alway.

'What do you suppose has happened, Miss Middleton?' he said, making a commencement upon the cold beef which chiefly represented his dinner. 'We have just heard by telegram that the Ministry have resigned. They were supposed to be so safe too. This will give our side a chance. We have suffered many things during their reign; far too long for the good of the country.'

Before I could make answer, and declare my distrust of the party referred to, Cousin Jane broke in, not having caught the political announcement, amid her Martha-like preoccupation.

'My dear John, do you know that I am afraid the children are going to get measles or some horrid thing, and what to do, now that Dr. Jones has gone to Charters Towers, I can't think. I noticed dear baby had a kind of rash last week, and that's just the way, I know, that measles commence, for Mrs. Stayathome told me that when her children had chicken-pox——'

'Now, really, my dear Jane,' said her husband, with a slight but distinct expression of annoyance, 'don't you think you could find some more appropriate topic of conversation?'

'Oh, of course! if you don't care about the children's health, and would rather talk about these absurd Government people, who will never help *you*, at any rate, well and good. But I must say that I think it very extraordinary that you should prefer nonsense of that kind to your children's welfare.'

'My children's welfare is very dear to me, as you well know, Jane,' he replied, and again the wrinkles upon his brow, in process of smoothing before, began to corrugate afresh. 'Still, I do not think any harm would result from leaving the consideration of possible measles until to-morrow morning; do you, Miss Middleton?'

'All depends upon whether the danger is imminent,' said I; 'in this case I may almost pronounce it not so, as I was present at a consultation with a lady of experience about an hour ago. But, Mrs. Quartzman,' said I insidiously, 'do you remember promising me that I should have my own way in everything?'

'Yes, certainly I do; and, John, if you had only been lying on the sofa this day instead of me, in the house, and seen the beautiful quiet way in which Miss Middleton got all the children to work with her in school, and how even Jack and Jill obeyed her, you would have promised her anything.'

'I am sure you have my full permission, wife,' said he, gratefully. 'We cannot do enough for such a friend in need as she has been to us.'

'Well, then, Mrs. Quartzman,' said I, 'I warned you that I was eccentric. One of my peculiarities is that I can't bear to hear household matters spoken of, or the slightest discussion raised upon what are

called practical subjects during the time set apart for meals, more particularly in the evening. The mere hint of such a thing gives me indigestion, which produces a feeling of irritability, almost like derangement. Would you mind then omitting all reference to such topics on account of my state of health? I am asking too much, I feel, but I have always been indulged in this respect.'

'Dearest Miss Middleton!' she replied enthusiastically, 'your wishes shall be a law to us henceforward; neither I nor John will ever' (here I observed a slight, perhaps involuntary, contraction of that gentleman's left eyelid) 'offend in that way in future; I daresay you will be sure to have a book or something of that kind in your head. But don't despair, you will take to domestic concerns quite kindly by and by, I feel sure. Let me see, have you been reading any new books lately?'

'Only *Herbert Hazelmere* by Mrs. Geoffrey Watch. It is very thoughtful and rather brilliant. They say she is to get seven thousand pounds for it.'

'Seven thousand pounds!' echoed Cousin Jane, 'for a book written by a woman too! I can hardly believe it. I never thought women had such fair play shown them. John, why don't you write a book? You used to be fond of scribbling in the newspapers; you might easily do that instead of reading or smoking all the evening.'

'The writing which people pay you for doing is not so easy as you seem to think, my dear, though I daresay I might make a few pounds that way now and then, if you would look up authorities, and take

some of the "plain work," as you say in sewing, off my hands. Is it a bargain?'

'I should really be delighted to do it, if you can make it pay, and you think me clever enough,' said poor Jane. 'I really had no idea that novel-writing was much more than an idle amusement, hardly better than novel-reading.'

'There are novels and novels; you and I must think of a few subjects,' I said to her. 'If two women put their heads together, they can surely discover something that will interest mankind, not to mention their own sex. If Mr. Quartzman will promise to work out our ideas he will distinguish himself, I feel sure. Shall we begin to-morrow?'

'I am ready to begin now,' she said eagerly; 'but *truly* now, John dear, *do* you think I can help you, or are you laughing at my ignorance?'

John replied suitably, so that was arranged, as I thought, to the general benefit of the household. I took care to keep Jane up to her engagement.

At first she was sure she had no time. I proved to her that, after working all the morning, it was economy in the widest sense to stop her needle precisely at half-past twelve, and take up a book or newspaper. I also secured another half-hour in the afternoon. These intervals of leisure served to arouse her long-dormant intellect. She gradually began to take an interest in the books and magazines I chose for her. By using a little forethought, she effected even greater results in her needlework department than (she confessed) she had ever managed before. We were lucky in our first selection of a subject, and Mr. Quartzman, who had a ready pen,

was happy in his treatment of it. So he was rewarded, by a newspaper proprietor, with a compliment and a cheque. Never was there a more fortunate remittance. Mr. Quartzman handed it gallantly to his wife for a pressing household need, and she, sobbing out her thanks, from that day abandoned her objection in favour of the subjective conversational method, and ever afterwards confined her crockery and cooking reports strictly to business hours.

Meanwhile, day by day, the moulding of this life-study grew under my hands. My pupils were affectionate, and, after a while, reasonable and obedient, though to such an extent were they deficient of all comprehension of order that I almost doubted whether it was not an incurable hereditary defect. However, I was determined to subdue them in this particular, cost what it might. Did I mention before that I was of a tenacious, and what superficial people might call obstinate, disposition? Never mind! everybody worth a straw is obstinate. I was determined to drill my youthful recruits to the verge of oppression rather than fail. Of course in the end I conquered. I used to cover the walls of the schoolroom with mottoes, printed in large type, on cardboard, such as this—'A place for everything, and everything in its place,' 'Never delay business,' 'Thrift makes rich,' 'Order is heaven's first law,' 'Self-control is the flower of civilisation.' I instituted a system of prizes for those who chose to compete in the good-conduct line, by means of which I stimulated my younger charges, notably. Occasionally I made speeches, not too long, such as: 'My dear

children! I only punish you for want of punctuality, industry, and order to save you from harder punishments in that much more severe school—the World —which you will all enter some day. No mercy will be shown you *there* for these faults, the punishments—of which you will have no warning—may break your hearts, or ruin your lives. Don't you think it real kindness of me now to try and break you all in beforehand?'

'Then we shall be steady in harness when our time comes, Miss Middleton,' said Charlie, appreciating the bush simile. 'But I wish people weren't born careless and lazy, though. It would make work, and doing things properly ever so much easier.'

'People are nearly all alike in that way, Charlie, it is only that some try harder than others to do what is right.'

'Oh! but they're *not*,' objected the young casuist. 'That's where it's unfair. Some coves at the State school were quite *fond* of their lessons; always knew them and never got into scrapes, but then, they didn't know games, couldn't fight, and were just like great girls.'

'Well, but there are other fellows, Charlie, at school and in the world (*I think* I asked you not to make use of the word "coves" again, as it is vulgar and not even slang of a good kind) who are clever at their books, also at games, and even fighting—what you would call "good all-round fellows." Don't you think it worth while to try and be like that? Think how it would please your mother and father, besides it might give you the means of doing ever so much for your brothers and sisters.'

'And I suppose it would please you too, Miss Middleton, wouldn't it? You'll see—I'll work at my Latin and Euclid like a horse; I never thought I could tackle them as well as I've done lately.'

Harriet was open to influence through her music lessons. With a strong natural taste for music, though backward for want of teaching, she had arrived at the ambitious stage when she grudged no labour to excel. I spared no trouble, in school and out of school, as long as she was patient with her other tasks and duties. If she showed indolence with these I discontinued the music lesson.

Having discovered the power of this lever, I did not fail to work it for her mental advantage.

My pupils soon came to understand that, although from the moment I entered the schoolroom I overlooked no fault and received no excuse for non-performance of tasks, my transformation into the friend and playmate, once the lessons were over, was thorough and complete. I shared their games, I took them long walks, and extemporised picnics for them on holidays. I saw that their comforts were attended to in all lawful ways, constituting myself their advocate whenever they received less than their due. Having a liberal home allowance for dress, I contrived to purchase for them little luxuries and toys which further cemented our mutual confidence.

Gradually, therefore, I succeeded, like a sort of benevolent Jesuit, in controlling the habits and moulding the characters of the different members of the family with which I was domiciled. The head of the house thanked me in his heart, I could see,

for the change wrought in his wife's mental proclivities by my artful charity in weaning her from the eternal treadmill round of mechanically performed household tasks, to the occasional contemplation of the glorious universe of art and literature. She, poor hard-worked matron, thanked me with the tears in her eyes, for the invaluable benefit of education which, through me alone, her children were enjoying, and for the joy and peace of the household which had resulted from my successful administration.

'One would think I had rescued them all from slavery,' said I to myself, one day. 'And yet, if one comes to consider, it may be that I *have* after a fashion. I hope I am not growing vain. I certainly am an enthusiast. It is a bore, with that temperament, if one goes wrong. Like an engine running off the rails, the more steam on, the farther it gets from the line.

'But in a *good* cause, the more enthusiastic one is the better. And this *is* a righteous cause, Portia Middleton,' said I fiercely to myself, 'if ever there was one; a good deed in every sense. So I shall go on with it to the very end.'

Even in the kitchen I did not disdain to exhibit my powers of reasonable suasion. The maid-servants were very good indeed, as domestics go. They were hard-working, neat-handed, and intelligent, as indeed are many of the Australian-born house-servants. But they are not always easy to manage, because of their extreme independence of character. Cousin Jane humoured them too much, being afraid of speaking in tones of disapproval, and more afraid

of the dreary time of 'home rule' which generally succeeded an exodus. One of these high-contracting personages, the cook and laundress, had for some reason taken in bad part remarks made by me on my first arrival. In a passive fashion, she contrived to annoy me in many ways. She was frequently unpunctual in serving up the meals, particularly of the early dinner, and as she declined to take orders from me, Mrs. Quartzman was in despair as to our future relations. She always fell back on the fact that 'Mary Anne was a good girl.'

'I am aware of that,' I said; 'but I could suggest some improvement on her management, if she would let me, by which better results would be attained with increased economy.'

'Oh! for goodness sake,' said Cousin Jane, 'don't think of that; both of them would give warning on the spot, and then whatever should I do?'

'I will ensure their not giving warning,' said I; 'but I must have my own way for all that; I will bide my time, and wait for an opportunity.'

This latter re-arrangement was not long in coming. One Saturday morning Harriet came to me with a face of less concern than annoyance, saying, 'Oh, Miss Middleton! isn't it a nuisance, Mary Anne has got one of her headaches, and says she is so dreadfully ill she is sure she can't cook the dinner; it's Susan's day for scrubbing the floors, and mother doesn't know what to do. Isn't it provoking of Mary Anne?'

'My dear Harriet,' said I, 'you don't suppose Mary Anne would have a bilious headache if she could help it? I know from experience what a

wretched feeling it is. Surely you pity her; do not let a trifling inconvenience prevent you from showing mercy to your humbler and poorer fellow-creatures.'

'Mary Anne is not a bit humble, nor half as poor as we are, if it comes to that,' said the girl; 'but I suppose, as you say, Miss Middleton, that she didn't half kill herself with a headache on purpose. She's as pale as a ghost; what can we do?'

'It is luckily Saturday, and a holiday,' I said. 'Now wouldn't you like, Harriet, to put on your brown holland apron and help me to do a day's cooking? I think we could manage dinner, and your father's tea. Then poor Mary Anne can lay her throbbing head upon her pillow, and recover herself just as if she were a lady.'

Harriet opened her eyes—'Oh, Miss Middleton! can *you* cook? Why, I believe you know everything. Wherever did you learn?'

'I was a kind of lay Sister of Mercy,' I said, 'once for a whole winter. We used to cook and wash for the poor women whom we visited in our district. I have sometimes thought it was a winter well employed.'

'Dear me! and do you really think it is our duty to do such things for these kind of people, Miss Middleton?'

I whispered, 'Who was it that said, "If ye have done it for the least of these little ones ye have done it unto Me." Tell your mother not to fret herself, and leave me to talk to Mary Anne.'

I found the young woman alluded to, having braced up her courage after a fashion worthy of a higher sphere, attempting with a pale face to peel

the vegetables for the day's dinner, and ever and anon putting a trembling hand to her burning brow.

'Mary Anne!' I said; 'you are not fit for work to-day. Your headache must be very bad.'

'It's that bad that I feel as if I should fall down dead every minute; but who's to cook the dinner if I give in? Thank you all the same, miss.'

'I will, and Miss Harriet will help me—this is a school holiday, you know, and it's not the first time I have done a little cooking.'

CHAPTER IV

I SPOKE to Mary Anne persuasively, assuring her that Miss Harriet and I could easily do the cooking, and give her the rest she so badly needed for her aching head.

'So if you will go to bed, like a good girl, everything will go right till to-morrow morning.'

'You, miss!' said she incredulously. 'You cook the dinner, and wash up and leave everything tidy—however could you manage it? Why you'd spoil them teeny little hands of yours—and the dinner too, like enough! No, I'll manage it somehow. Oh! oh!'

Here an acute spasm of pain seemed to rack the girl's very temples; brave as she was, she could not repress a groan, which went to my heart. 'Here,' thought I, 'is the same degree of courage displayed, which, under favourable circumstances, makes the heroine of high life in fiction. Now, poor Mary Anne, whatever her constancy under torture, can hardly rise above the position of a good plain cook. Certainly it is a valuable diploma in Australia!'

'Don't be a goose, Mary Anne,' said I good-hum-

ourcdly. 'If you half kill yourself, and have to go to bed, that will be worse for Mrs. Quartzman and the family than a spoiled meal—but I'll bet you a neck-ribbon that I give them all a good dinner, and if good cooks were not so scarce, I might deprive you of your place. I've sent Miss Harriet to tell her mother; so go and lie down *at once*, and I'll come and see you by and by. Take this eau-de-cologne with you and bathe your forehead.'

'You're too good to me, Miss Middleton,' said the poor girl, overcome both with pain and remorse. 'I'll go now. I'm quite ashamed to take your kindness after all my rudeness to you; but I'm that bad, I really can't hold up a minute longer.'

. . . . .

We accomplished that dinner; we covered ourselves with glory. After all, there are worse ways of spending a day than producing certain results, with given materials, in a quiet, clean kitchen. I had taken the trouble to learn thoroughly how to roast and boil, cook vegetables, and make jellies and puddings for the sick, at the St. Martha Charitable Home, or, as unpleasant people persisted in calling it, the High Church Nunnery. Convent, or not, we learned many useful things there, though I came ultimately to doubt whether it could be wise to devote the whole of my expensively trained entity to acting as cookmaid for people who, but for extravagance or dissipation, might have been as rich and as occupationless as ourselves.

The charitable 'craze,' as father called it, waned and disappeared finally, but the cooking remained. Hence I was able to show Harriet, to the great

increase of her respect for me, how to make pastry, as well as to play on the piano; to comprehend French dishes, in a small way, as well as French exercises.

'Why, Miss Middleton, you're a female Crichton!' she said; 'I daresay you could wash and iron and get up fine linen on a pinch.'

'Yes,' I replied, in a matter-of-fact way, 'I can do that fairly well, for which I have to thank the Sister of Mercy period. We did the laundry work in turn; it was especially necessary to be able to assist our poor families in that department. Want of soap sets in long before want of bread becomes imminent.'

'I would give all the world to be like you,' said she, with enthusiasm. 'What shall I do when you go away? We shall be lost in a sea of muddle, as we used to be.'

'Not if you show your love for me, Harriet, by carrying out my wishes. I shall be quite contented if I hear that you have striven earnestly to take my place, as the eldest daughter should, at the head of the household. Think how you could help your mother, how you could comfort your father, and mould the minds of your younger brothers and sisters, now so likely to follow your example. You will try, will you not?'

'Indeed, indeed I will, Miss Middleton! I shall not be able to come near your standard, but I will try, for we shall never see any one like you again. Mother will never, never, as long as she lives, get such another governess.'

'I don't think she will,' said I, *sotto voce;*

and perhaps I may be pardoned this morsel of vanity.

Having concluded our cooking, washed our dishes and plates, and left everything clean and orderly for Mary Anne to return to, we arranged the tea-table, parading our clear soup and a successful curry, as a treat for Mr. Quartzman, besides a mould of calf's foot jelly, by way of still greater surprise.

That gentleman was late, and entering the sitting-room just before the usual hour of serving, rather hurriedly, was greeted with the news from his wife that 'Mary Anne was ill with one of her terrible headaches, and had been obliged to go to bed, and——'

'My dear,' said he, somewhat impatiently, 'I thought that you had relinquished this style of entertaining conversation; only I hope to goodness there is something to eat, as I have brought Hugh Wharfedale home with me, and he is at this moment in my dressing-room.'

'Good gracious! Mr. Wharfedale!' said Cousin Jane. 'You don't say so. Why, he has not been here for ages.'

'All the more reason why he should have some dinner now. It's too bad; I really believe——'

What Mr. Quartzman really believed, now that the conversation had reached this, for him, appalling point of denunciation, cannot with certainty be known, because Cousin Jane at this juncture wisely threw her arms round his neck and whispered something which caused his countenance to clear, and his voice to undergo perceptible modulation.

'Oh! if that is the case,' he exclaimed, 'well and good.'

'You must pardon me, my dear.' This to me. 'Really, it appears as if we were to owe you everything we have in the world.'

'Allow me to introduce Mr. Wharfedale.'

At this proposal, a tall man entered the room, greeting Cousin Jane with the freedom of an old acquaintance, sure of his welcome. 'Ah, Harrie,' said he to my eldest pupil, 'how you've grown! Long frock, too. Forgotten how to run, I daresay; capital time you used to make, you know; lost any sheep lately?'

We were introduced, and bowed gravely. Part of the conversation with Harriet was hieroglyphic, but it was explained by the young lady herself.

'It's too bad of you, Mr. Wharfedale, teasing me about that unlucky visit of yours, when we lived at Back Creek. We had no butcher within twenty miles, Miss Middleton, and father used to buy a sheep at a time. One poor thing, shut up in the stable, managed to get out. We saw the week's dinner making off, so Charlie and I and all the children had to run after it. I was first up, and stooping to catch the creature's leg, fell down, still holding on, till Charlie came and secured it. Mr. Wharfedale was wicked enough to come up just then.'

'Never mind, Harrie, it was a most exciting chase. I saw the whole run. The way you made play down the hill was splendid. I burned to join the hunt but I had a young horse. I hope Miss Middleton doesn't discourage outdoor exercise?'

'Quite the contrary,' I said. 'But Harriet is nearly a young woman now, so we have to modify our games. Society is exacting where girls are concerned.'

'It's a pity, too,' he said, 'that so much restraint should be thought necessary. I suppose there's a reason for it.'

'There's also a reason for having tea when the bell rings—especially when one's been bothered with small vexations all day,' said Mr. Quartzman. 'If Hugh hadn't turned up, I was coming home in a real bad temper.'

'Nobody would believe him, would they, Mrs. Quartzman?' said the guest, offering her his arm, and making for the dining-room door, as if he knew the way perfectly, while I followed with the host. He took occasion to whisper to me—

'Capital fellow Wharfedale; old friend of ours, knew us when we lived at Holmhurst—rather in a different way, certainly. I'm so glad we have a decent dinner to give him. Puts me in mind of old times; ah! what pleasant days they were, and —bless me! what a grand spread!'

Nothing could have turned out more fortunately. Cousin Jane and I having dressed the modest tea-table with as much ornament in the shape of flowers as we dared, had ventured upon a bottle of Albury Reisling for the delectation of the head of the house and to do honour to a dinner of my cooking, and lo! enters to us unexpectedly the favoured guest, in whose praise she (as well as her husband, Harriet, and Charlie) was unable to say enough.

'Squatter, of course,' thought I to myself. 'No

other man in a colony has such an air of mingled complacency and self-possession. When things are looking well, the squatter on leave has a manner that is a sort of mixture of a sailor, a soldier, and a country gentleman, with the best traits of each in solution.'

I always liked squatters, I must say; and this particular specimen of the genus was handsome and stately-looking, with the air of a man of the world.

To do him justice, it did not seem to occur to him to concern himself about my approval or otherwise. He and his old friends were too happy together to think of any one less intimately acquainted, so relinquishing all expectation of notice by the lion of the evening, I devoted myself to the duties of the tea-table, and somewhat unselfishly amused myself by noting the mutual pleasure which the meeting afforded to my cousin, her husband, and his guest.

They certainly revelled in reminiscences of that pleasant time long past, when they lived near a mining metropolis, with a by no means contracted society of which she was the belle, and he a leading and prosperous mine-owner. How they went to Melbourne by rail whenever they had a week to spare! How balls, pic-nics, and vice-regal entertainments were as common as Sunday school feasts! How even a trip to Europe was contemplated, if the shares in the 'Great Intended' had kept up. Ah me! even the memory of past joys is something. The light came to poor Jane's eyes—those soft blue eyes which had long since 'forgotten to shine'—the colour to her faded cheek, the very tone of her voice

changed in 'timbre' and sweetness, as the days of her triumph came back. Her husband was almost equally transfigured, as old stories, allusions, and well-remembered jests came forth from their laughing lips. And in him I commenced to notice an air of dignity, a marked distinction of manner, which I had never observed before.

As for Mr. Wharfedale, his stern features relaxed, his dark eye glowed and glittered in a way I should never have thought possible, as, lying back in his chair, he laughed and gesticulated at so many of the crowding old-world memories.

His unconscious bearing interested me in spite of myself. Those who had seen him in everyday society could never, I felt certain, have believed that so much benevolence, affectionate friendship, and delicate sympathy could be expressed by the haughty features only seen in repose. It was a revelation most rare, but accurate and complete for the benefit of whom it might concern. I ought, perhaps, under other circumstances, to have felt a tinge of disappointment that my efforts in the culinary line, after the first compliments, seemed unrecognised. They appreciated the clear soup, they feasted on the curry with evident appetite, they praised the flowers, emptied and replaced the flask of Reisling; but all the time they spoke and acted as if they had been dining together *à la carte* in that *bon vieux temps* when *entrées* and *entremets* were matters of course, and iced champagne habitual as table beer.

'Never mind,' thought I to myself, as the two friends adjourned to the verandah to smoke and Cousin Jane to the nursery, leaving Harriet and me

to clear away and, with the help of the housemaid, conduct that most prosaic occupation known as 'washing up.' 'I have done my duty at any rate. This is a change and a study as well. On Sunday we shall have some rest, thank goodness! when perhaps Mr. Wharfedale may have leisure for general society.'

Of course this had not been my first experience of social intercourse other than with my cousin and her husband, since I had arrived. Only it was one decidedly new to our habit of life. Waronga was not devoid of the ordinary component parts of provincial society in Australia. But, carrying out my intention of being merely known as 'Miss Middleton, the governess,' I was studiously let alone, when not treated with contemptuous toleration by that moderately large section of ordinary people who seem to consider that a girl with sufficient intelligence to teach her youthful fellow-creatures, must be below, rather than above, the general feminine average; also, that if the pecuniary circumstances of her family, for which she is never responsible, render a salary indispensable, that fact should also be reckoned to her demerit. By these good people, I was, therefore, much to my amusement, either mildly patronised, or quietly ignored in any conversation which took place in my presence. Certain male members of the local families appeared not disinclined to relax these austere tenets in my favour, but a studied indifference in my manner caused them, after a while, to relinquish any small attentions. I was gradually set down as 'a girl they could not quite make out,' and so permitted to possess my soul in peace.

But here was a specimen wholly distinct from the ordinary class of visitors whom Mrs. Quartzman, partly from her husband's business connection, and partly from the intellectual barrenness of the land, was compelled chiefly to receive. He was not altogether unknown to me by name, for I had heard of Hugh Wharfedale in Melbourne, which metropolis he visited at intervals, although his stations lay principally within the colonies of New South Wales and Queensland.

Rich, unmarried, inclined to be eccentric, he was one of those exceptional persons who, by some means or other, have power to awaken special interest in the female breast. I had heard more than one girl of my acquaintance in town speak with great decision of his general 'niceness,' to use the rather absurd phrase which, with them, characterised Hugh Wharfedale. He was accused of being *difficile*, cynical in his ideas, and by no means too amiable in female society. If they only knew it, men are far more valued who thus hold themselves out of reach of the ordinary female blandishments. So whether it was because of his wealth, his talents—for he was said to be clever—or his averseness to gaiety of the ordinary pattern, he was over-valued rather than otherwise, and as certain acidulated critics phrased it, 'run after' accordingly.

So here was this phœnix, like an eagle newly alighted in a farmyard, walking about with folded wings among the commonplace Gallinæ of Waronga, comporting himself as meekly as though he had never known more romantic surroundings. Certainly he was in an atmosphere of intense appreciation

—the *bienvenu* most unmistakable. Every one delighted to do him honour.

Mr. Quartzman was boyishly enthusiastic about him—splendid fellow, firm friend, clever, shrewd, generous, full of fun underneath, 'and I don't know what all,' as my nurse used to say. Cousin Jane had never met any man like him (except John of course), he had been so good to them, and the truest friend to poor John in time of need. He was associated, too, with all the pleasantest time of their married life. Charlie reverenced him—'what horses he always rode and drove!' Harriet looked upon him as a demi-god. Had any rash mortal dared to question the right of Mr. Wharfedale to be invariably associated with the superlative degree, it would have gone hard with him at Waronga.

Sunday was truly a fine day. Not simply free from rain or storm, but one of those visions of Paradise proper to the almost perfect winter climate of the north-east corner of Victoria. We all went to the little church in the village, where the tall figure and conspicuously foreign aspect of our guest created much natural curiosity. In the afternoon, we strolled along the bank of the Murray, towards a favourite colour-study of mine, where a rivulet ran below in a lofty red bluff, and a noble reach of the river was visible. The elder children were wild to come; Mr. Quartzman and his friend, as usual, brought up the rear.

Apparently they had an interminable number of subjects of great mutual interest still undiscussed, for they kept on talking with undiminished eagerness, while we others scrambled on in front. The spot where

the brooklet came rushing over its rocky steep was reached, the ferns gathered and bepraised, before a word was interchanged between the stranger knight and me. Suddenly, without preface, he addressed himself to me; Mr. Quartzman had been dragged off to gather ferns.

'You must allow me to compliment you, Miss Middleton, on the improvement you have effected in my young friends; I could hardly have believed it possible. Don't I remember them a few years since? Always affectionate, fine-natured children, but wild as hawks. However did you gain such perfect control over them in so short a time?'

'Partly by kindness, partly by firmness,' I made answer; 'a good share of patience was needed, you may be sure.'

'I can quite understand *that*,' he said. 'My astonishment is how you could ever make up your mind to such a mode of life. Personally, I would rather starve than act as a tutor.'

'People take it for granted that teaching is intolerably tedious. It is really not so bad in reality; besides the results are often gratifying.'

'In this instance doubly so, I feel sure,' he said, coming back to his first idea. 'And, pardon me, your influence appears to have been felt in the household as well. With the warmest friendship for my old friend Jack Quartzman and his kind-hearted loyal wife, I used to laugh at their housekeeping a good deal.'

'I have a turn for arranging other people's business,' I said; 'it is not always thought to be a pleasant trait; but where everything is surrendered

to one, as in this case, the temptation is great, you must own.'

'I have always cherished a prejudice against the *esprits forts* of your sex,' he said, half reflectively, 'yet I suppose energy and foresight—horrid idea—*are* needed by women as well as men.'

'When they do not exist, the results are sometimes disastrous.'

'But what becomes of that beautiful fancy, the soft and clinging nature of woman, her dependence upon man, the ivy and the oak; in fact, the grand central idea of chivalry?'

'If it ever had any real existence, you may depend upon it,' I answered, 'that the affairs of mediæval society were managed after some prosaic fashion that did not appear on the surface.'

'Possibly,' he assented reluctantly; 'still it is a fair dream vanished—an ideal shattered—unless one can believe that the softer feminine qualities, such as one observes in the useless graceful individuals of your sex, are retained unimpaired.'

'Really, I cannot say,' I replied, finding the conversation a little awkward. 'It is one of those problems which can only be solved by experience.'

'A ruinously expensive plan,' he said musingly.

'Oh! what *lovely* ferns these are,' cried Harriet, now coming up with her father, full of girlish delight, and bearing an armful of great delicate fronds. 'We found them near such a wonderful cave, with the water trickling down over moss like green velvet. Do you think we can find out the botanical names when we get home?'

'I daresay,' said I, knowing them perfectly well,

but not choosing to be oppressively well informed. 'How beautifully green they are; I see you have three different sorts.'

'And I saw a platypus,' called out Charlie, 'worth all your bothering ferns. If I'd had a gun, I could have shot him easily. He had such a jolly bill, just like a duck.'

'Or a tailor,' said Mr. Wharfedale; "'a beast with a bill," though the same definition applies to other tradesmen we can't do without. Do you know, Quartzman, we ought to turn homeward, it's a longish walk? Won't you be tired after it, Miss Middleton?'

'Only reasonably so. Harriet and I walk a good deal. I suppose I ought to be ashamed of my want of feminine delicacy, but I can't do without my walks abroad, and this is an enticing neighbourhood when you know, what Charlie used to call, the "lay of the country."'

Ere we saw the cottage, the stars had commenced to shine out—first one or two, then more, lastly a gathering host in the deep blue southern sky. Faint fire-points were they at first, then lambent, scintillating, flame-brilliant, wondrous company! The half-seen silver sheets of the broad stream reflected them irregularly, through ebon shadows cast by swaying river oaks gleaming in the hushed eve. The preceding week had been dry, so that the winding woodpaths were firm to the footstep, while the night air was deliciously cool, pure, and even exhilarating.

When we reached home, Cousin Jane was important and cheerful, drawing attention to the fact that she had laid the tea-table, Mary Anne being

out on a recreational visit to her friends, and Susan, as usual, engaged with the children. 'I really thought you were lost,' she said. 'I couldn't remedy the matter, but thought the next best thing was to take care you had something to eat when you did return. Miss Middleton, you look rather pale. Harriet, did you put the comforter round your neck that I gave you? I think you had better go to bed a little earlier, and put your feet in hot water.'

Our distinguished guest remained for about a week, during which time Cousin Jane and I saw very little of him in the daytime, as he regularly 'took himself off,' as she expressed it, with Mr. Quartzman, having, he explained, correspondence to get through, accounts, etc., which he could manage more easily at the little office at the township.

'He can smoke more comfortably there too,' said Jane plaintively. 'Dear me, I wonder what men can find in those nasty pipes—cigars are worse, though they look more refined—that they spend so much time in burning tobacco and breathing it?'

'There is a reason,' I said, 'or millions would not be of one opinion on the subject. Men say that it calms the nerves, assists meditation, and tends generally to a satisfactory condition of mind, even when circumstances are most adverse. I must say I have met a good many men, and nearly all women, who would be improved by smoking—metaphorically, of course.'

'But the scent is so dreadful.'

'Not worse than others which we have to put up with in our households, and cannot complain of. The odour of tobacco is acrid and pungent, not in

any sense noisome, but simply disagreeable. We make a mighty pother about it, and, I think, unreasonably. It's a habit to which we ought to accustom ourselves. It cannot be wise to drive men from home to indulge it with greater freedom abroad.'

'Well, I daresay there is something in that. I must say I never could break John off it. The most I could do was to prevent it growing upon him, by never letting him smoke in peace in the house, if I could help it.'

'Then you have not reasoned the subject out, Mrs. Quartzman, but have started with a prejudice, and followed it up all your life. When I am married —that is, if ever I do such a commonplace thing— my husband shall smoke in the drawing-room if he likes, and I will light his pipe for him.'

'In the drawing-room! But it's such a dirty habit.'

'I assume that my husband, like yours, will be a gentleman. How, then, *can* any of his habits be such as you describe? If he be delicately clean in his person, as all gentlemen are, and smokes good tobacco in a nice pipe or a cigar, what can there be dirty about the matter? However, the girl of the period—though I don't approve of that—is smoking cigarettes herself in society. That will soon settle the question.'

'How dreadful! how very dreadful! It makes one almost thankful to live in the bush. But I was going to say that Mr. Wharfedale is such a nice man, and so really good in every way that I shouldn't so much mind *his* smoking. Just suppose he should take a fancy to you, Portia,—I mean Miss Middleton.'

'That doesn't come out of the cross-examination, as I once heard Judge Carteret say to father,' I answered. 'Why suppose anything so absurd? It is time for afternoon school.'

Some days after this conversation Mr. Wharfedale departed, sincerely regretted, as the papers say, and unaffectedly bewailed by the younger members of the family. In spite of the daily absence at Waronga, there was ample time for talk in the evenings, and occasionally during walks before breakfast. Strangely, however, we nearly always disagreed in argument. He strongly objected to didactic utterances on the part of our sex; and I am afraid, from my habit of thinking out questions for myself, I had acquired, unconsciously, a tendency that way.

'If there is anything,' he used to say, 'calculated to make a man behave like a savage, it is to hear a woman lay down the law in an authoritative manner. It is so alien to all true theories of the sex, that one is tempted to wish she, if otherwise nice, had never learned to read or write. One might love a *belle sauvage*, but a blue stocking, never! not if she were Hypatia herself.'

'One doesn't defend pedantic women,' I mildly pleaded; 'but surely a cultured intellect, with the power of imparting knowledge, was a good thing in either sex. It refined society, was beneficial to the young,' —here he gave a gruff token of assent—'besides,' I went on to say, 'if culture were universal with both sexes, there would be no occasion for conceit in the possessors.'

'Very likely there was sound argument in what I said, but (present company, of course, specially

excepted) where there was a combination of the *utile et dulce* to a degree he had hitherto deemed impossible' (this was his first, last, and only compliment, I beg to state), 'he never did like strong-minded women, and he never should.'

In this unsatisfactory state of mind he departed for Queensland or Patagonia, or some other inconceivably remote region, whence he might return next year or nevermore.

So uncertain were his movements that the Quartzmans, I could see, calmly made up their minds never to set eyes on him again.

Somehow the school duties did not go on so satisfactorily as before. I did not know why. A kind of chronic dulness, a lack of hopefulness, seemed to oppress every one. I caught myself wondering whether, after all, the game was worth the candle, this wearing-out life in the wilderness, teaching a commonplace 'decayed family'—they were not that,—but I was in a froward humour. A kind of Quixotic enterprise, which no one else could have dreamed of. Why should I have immolated myself to it? And what would be my reward? How pale and void my present life, still more my future, seemed! I was weak enough to cry myself to sleep that night. But I awoke before dawn, and getting out of bed prayed penitently and contritely; after which my heart was lightened, and I soon wore myself into the old path of daily care and daily gratification at the results of my humble labours.

Charlie, about this time, was sent to Melbourne to the Church of England Grammar School. And a very good thing for him. He was a fine, honest,

affectionate lad, but getting beyond the age when a healthy boy can be successfully instructed by women.

It seems that Mr. 'Monte Cristo' Wharfedale had insisted upon this step being taken forthwith, and had charged himself with his maintenance, until he should be old enough to go into bush or bank life, whichever might be thought suitable for him.

'Good-bye, dear old Mammie Middleton; you *are* such an old grannie, you know (I told Mr. Wharfedale so one day, and he laughed, and said you were not so very old, and very nice-looking besides); but I should have been a shocking dunce when I went to school, if it hadn't been for you. Now I shall have a show at Latin, and History, and Euclid; you see if I don't; and I intend to work and let them see a fellow isn't such a muff if he has lived at Waronga. And I'm to choose in two years whether I'll go into a bank or on to a station. None of your stuffy banks for me though, if I know it. I'm an open-air man.'

I kissed the frank, hopeful boy, rich with the possibilities of youth's untouched exchequer, and felt thankful that I had been able to rescue him from the state of comparative ignorance in which I had found him. 'This, at any rate, has been a good deed,' I said to myself, 'so I ought to be contented and self-sustained by the thought.'

The season wore on. Soon the self-imposed term of my labours would arrive. Then I should be free to resume my place among my social equals. Once more I should be permitted to taste the sweets of gaiety, of congenial companionship, with new books, new ideas, all the thousand-and-one glories which go

to compose civilisation, so richly to be enjoyed in companionship with a full purse. Yet as the month approached I did not feel the joy at my expected emancipation which I expected. No one alluded to the separation now so imminent. The children said little, but they all looked, poor dears! as though the prospect was a melancholy one.

For myself, I felt that though, of course, perfectly free to carry out my original compact, having but made a promise for a fixed period, yet there would be a certain violation of the spirit of it if I relinquished my task for at least another half-year.

After that time Harriet, who had been lately developing fast and showing a gratifying desire to walk in the paths I had laid down for her, would be able to take upon herself the education of the younger children and the management of the household.

I should then be assured that the work I had with so much care initiated would be followed up. I might hereafter comfort myself with the assurance that I had at least been the light of one home, and had gladdened the hearts of my necessitous kindred with such as I had to give.

When the actual week came, I made up my mind. I had thought over the condition of the children, of the household, when I arrived, as contrasted with the present state of matters. Progress had been made; improvement in every respect was visible. Was it entirely owing to me and to my exertions? I could honestly say that it was.

Then came another question to be as honestly answered.

If I left them finally now, would the state of

matters last? I hoped it would; I trusted it would. But, probing my innermost heart, I could not with sincerity believe that such would be the case. Harriet was promising now, and eager to take my place in the management of the household, the teaching of the children. But her self-control could not as yet be confidently relied on. Her experience was brief, her education not sufficiently advanced, while any recurrence of the old worry and fatigue of housekeeping might cause an alteration for the worse in Jane's improved health, by which the fruit of a year's labour might be lost. Mr. Quartzman's face came before me as I thought over this, his air of security and peace when he returned from work in the evening, so different from the look he wore when I first saw him. No! Finally I told myself, 'I cannot risk the fall of the edifice I have built up. It is the work of my hands. I will return after a month's holiday and bestow another year of my life to complete what I have begun. Then I may rest secure that all has been done that could be done. I shall then have every hope that my work will be enduring and "not in vain in the Lord."'

When I communicated this determination to Cousin Jane and her family the day before that fixed for my departure, their emotion was unaffectedly deep and genuinely expressed. None of us could say a word for some minutes, but wept in unison. I thought myself fully repaid for any sacrifice I might have made.

Harriet threw her arms round my neck in an ecstasy of joy. Jane wept silently on her sofa. Jack and Jill danced a lively measure, as more appropriate

to their feelings, and even the little toddler said, 'I so glad oo not doin' 'way, Miss Midditon.'

Mr. Quartzman returned at night, and being promptly informed of the important news made as though he would have embraced me, and taking both my hands in his, held them until I thought he never intended to let them go again. He then said, 'My dearest Portia, no words of mine can express the joy I feel at the prospect of your return. You have been our guardian angel. You have done for this house what I scarcely deemed it was in the power of a mortal to do. If you had left us, and we dared not hope otherwise, we should have mourned you as a heavenly visitant fled away to a happier sphere. I do not exaggerate. But you will return, to be our hearth fairy! to brighten our lot again, and we shall be happy as heretofore. God bless you, my dear girl, and reward you for your good works!'

To all this I could say nothing. Too much was made of my paltry sacrifice. What had I given? only of the time which was to me a superfluity, of the energy which caused me unrest and pain, of the educated faculties for which I had before found no use. But my eyes were again full, and my voice of no present avail as an interpreter of feeling. So I discreetly retired till we were all summoned to tea, when greater cheerfulness, not to say jollity, prevailed than had been known since the passing of Mr. Wharfedale.

I took care that there should not be any tearfulness at my departure. 'Write me a letter once a week, Harriet,' I said, 'and tell me *everything* that

goes on—down to the speckled hen that Harold is going to set. He is to get on with his spelling, holidays notwithstanding, otherwise he will never get on in the world, and I shall have him sent to school when I come back.

'Such a ten-bladed knife as I am going to buy him in Melbourne, if he is good! Jack and Jill are to have a Chinese kite that sings and a doll that can walk—always supposing they are good and obey Harriet. I will send Jenny and Ethel a parasol and a bangle. I think that must be all now; the rest I will say in a letter. Good-bye, Mrs. Quartzman. Good-bye! don't starve yourself in my absence, whatever you do.'

'Starve myself?' she inquired.

'Yes, starve yourself! I don't mean the pink and white part of you, but the immortal, imperishable, divine Jane, endowed with an intellect, Mrs. Quartzman! Don't settle down to the stocking basket and darn yourself into a nonentity. Think of your poor husband, when he comes home "weary with the work of life."'

'Oh!' said she, much relieved, 'is that all? What a strange girl you are! Of course I will not, if it's only to please you. But, really, I am fond of reading now, and John thinks I am quite clever. I fished out an article on "Hereditary Transmission" the other day, which interested him ever so much.'

'That's the way to distinguish yourself. If women would oftener—Never mind. I'll send you up a box of books from Mullen's. Good-bye, dear!'

When I met dear father at the Spencer Street terminus that evening, what a Babylon Melbourne

appeared, with its wide, crowded streets and busy population, after the distant outpost of the Empire I had left, with its meagre unchanging garrison!

As he folded me in a loving embrace, before about a thousand people, I failed to realise that a year had passed since he had convoyed a discontented, *ennuyée* damsel on the outward-bound journey.

'Welcome back, my darling Portia!' he gasped out. He was so plump-looking after Mr. Quartzman, who was lean, and Mr. Wharfedale, who was muscular. 'But you don't mean to say it's a year since you went away? And how well you are looking! wonderfully well; such a complexion! and stouter —certainly stouter than you were. Mother herself will hardly know you. I think we must send up Bell in your place. She looks older than you, I tell her. But come along. They're all dying of impatience to see you.'

My modest belongings were hoisted into a cab, and as father and I entered our very comfortable close carriage, I could not help temporarily considering myself in the light of a country cousin, all unused to so much magnificence. That feeling might be trusted to wear off. But what went along with it, and which was worth any sum of money, was the delicious, real, schoolgirl sensation of unalloyed delight in the world of novelty, which now surrounded me and which I, city-bred as I was, had never before realised. Then the genuine, loving welcome of dear mother, the girls, and my brother Bob, who was at home on a visit, went to my heart. When I thought that all these luxuries and novelties were the direct results of my originality and daring, I was in danger

of being puffed up. But I repressed all feeling, save that of gratitude to Him who had granted my prayer for a sphere of usefulness and brought me safely home.

How delightful everything was! How charming was this crowded earnest metropolis, after the quiet country town from which I had been translated. Every breath I drew henceforth was a pleasure; every walk down the street was a luxury; every drive in the carriage a sensation; every dinner-party as one of childhood's feasts; every picnic was a Paradise peep; every dance a delirious revelry; every friend's house was a palace; every shop was an exhibition. If this state of mind was created by a year's voluntary exile, never was time better bestowed.

It was fairyland for the first month. Father and mother were touchingly affectionate, the dear girls quite faultless. I wondered that I had blamed them ever so slightly in my heart. Yet after a month—I was to stay two, during the great heat of January and February—I began to recall that little flock in the wilderness, and to catch myself in the afternoons thinking of the tasks that made the hours pass so quickly till the sun was low.

How were they getting on? Did they miss me? Was Jill's frock regularly mended, and was her honest little dark-eyed face as merry as ever—as suddenly o'ercast with tears? Did Harriet steadfastly uphold the weight of the task I had committed to her? And was Cousin Jane cheerful, or had her manifold duties 'collapsed her' utterly, as in the days before my despotism?

As I said before, I suppose I *must* be of a restless and unsatisfactory temperament—no sooner having realised happiness than desirous of the contrary sensation, by way of a change. I cannot account for my desire to return to Waronga gradually gaining force in any other way.

When I mentioned it during the first month, the girls were in despair, mother hysterical, and father really—that is not *quite seriously*—but what another man would have called vexed. Then I judiciously let the question drop. At the beginning of the eighth week I observed, smiling a little to myself, that there was not the same violent opposition to my departure. How few are the people in this world of whom one does not—or others, as the case may be, do not—get just a little tired! Certainly, I was not a visitor or a dependant. But I had—for imperfect sympathy with my own flesh and blood, and for generally flourishing about a purpose of some kind—got to be voted a trifle too *prononcée* for the family club. You see they were such *very* comfortable, methodical, regular folk, that the merest trifle of non-complaisance put them out—'got on their nerves,' as they expressed it. I am afraid I did so a little, latterly, as I used to rouse the girls with questions as to whether they ever thought of any one's well-being but their own, and if they would be satisfied with doing 'more nothing' to the end of their days?

They replied to me with great sweetness and politeness, but I could see they did not quite like it.

When the day (the second time of parting) came

we were all softly resigned. I had promised mother to return 'for good,' at the ensuing Christmas; and that being the case, I received absolution. She had listened with much interest, good kind soul, to my description of the change I had wrought in Jane's household, and the help and benefit I honestly believed I had been to her. All this Jane herself had confirmed in a letter overflowing with gratitude, which she had written to the old lady.

'Well, my dear Portia,' she said finally, 'we are told that "it is more blessed to give than to receive," and I cannot complain of your putting in practice—unusual as it appears—the lesson you have been taught in your childhood; I have been thinking much over your present occupation and I believe you are acting unselfishly, and that your work will have a blessing on it. God send you safe back to us at Christmas time!'

Poor old daddy was really sorry to lose me, I think. We used to have nice long talks, and I don't think I contradicted him as much as I used to do. He did not go up with me this time, but handed me over to an old squatter friend of his, whose sheep station was on the other side of the Murray. The whistle sounded, cutting our last kiss rather short, and I was literally going back to school after the holidays.

We had come early, however, on purpose to have a good quiet talk, and towards the end of it father said—

'Now, my dear Portia, you're no longer a girl——'

'I'm so sorry,' I said; 'daddy, are you quite sure?'

'I mean you're a young woman, my dear. In another year you'll be five-and-twenty.'

'Dreadful to think of,' I interposed, 'what then?'

'Well, my dear, you know you've all a little money of your own—and, in a general way, there's plenty of it in the family, thank God! so what I wanted to tell you was that if for any purpose, at any time, you wanted three or four hundred pounds—good investments are often met with in the country and Quartzman might see a chance now and then—why, you can draw on me for it.'

'I shall never want all that money. My hundred a year does a good deal more than dress me, I know, and very handy I find it.'

'I only said *if*, my dear,' said father, mildly astonished at my failing to see the advantage of being able to 'draw at sight.' 'Never mind! I hope you may never want money all your life more than you do now.'

I kept thinking of this strange idea of daddy's as we went along. What could I do with five hundred pounds? 'It would not set Charlie up in a station, would it?' I asked Mr. Grizzley, and he said 'Not at this time of day; though the time had been when five hundred pounds' worth of stock, and a good block of country (to be had for the taking up and ten pounds a year rent) would start a man well, ay, and *had* done so with many that held their heads high enough now.'

I took courage to ask, 'How much then?'

'Nothing under two or three thousand pounds; say three thousand at the very least—and that will only buy a partnership in a far-out district, which,

after all, was the best way for a youngster to begin.'

. . . . . .

When we arrived at Redgum terminus—so called from its being originally a sawmill, with a tiny township tacked on to it—nearly the whole family had come to meet me. Poor things! how delighted they were! The tears came into my eyes also, rather to Mr. Grizzley's astonishment, as he delivered me over. He told Cousin Jane that he thought I was quite a different sort of girl.

Charlie had borrowed a double buggy, and came up in all the glory of a pair of fresh horses looking nice and sleek—the grass on the riverside common being good. It held his mother, with Harriet and the baby, Jack and Jill, with continuous smiles all over their pretty faces, which deepened into wonder as my unreasonable quantity of luggage, with so many parcels and bandboxes, was put out.

However, all were finally stowed in, and we drove off triumphantly before a crowd of at least twenty Waronga people.

The faithful Mary Anne, who had not given warning or got married, or done anything dreadful in my absence, had impressed herself as to the tea prepared in my honour. Mr. Quartzman returned shortly afterwards, and we sat down, a most joyous family party. I was, of course, incited to pour forth my narrative of adventures; on the other hand, I was speedily informed of the wonderful things that had happened at Waronga in my absence. One thing was certain, that they had not been very lonely without me, though everybody had been 'good' in

my absence, and could not sufficiently express their delight at having me back again.

As is usual with travellers, it cost me some consideration to get my mental focus duly accommodated to the landscape; but in a week or two all was much as usual, and I was drilling and denouncing during the day; walking by the river bank with Harriet in the evenings, much as though I had never quitted Waronga. Such creatures of habit are we all!

My presents — of which I had been careful to bring back a varied assortment — kept up a sustained interest for a full month after my arrival. Among these was the last sweet thing in bonnets, with which I recalled to Jane her lost Paradise, after having had her assertion that she had carefully read every book I had sent her, confirmed by Mr. Quartzman. He, I thought, scarcely looked as well as the rest of the family. I recognised the old careworn expression deepening into depression. When I taxed him with it, he admitted that times were bad, money scarce; he had an annoying bad debt of greater amount than usual; still, nothing of any moment or likely to cause serious inconvenience.

What really had troubled him was a letter from an old friend with whom he had held mining shares and interests in days gone by at Sandhurst. This friend, a clever man of business, and thoroughly acquainted with mining property (a good deal to say of a man, he laughingly observed), had sent him valuable information. Among the initiated it was known that a revival of the quartz-reefs of Sandhurst was imminent. He mentioned several which were

about to be worked by companies, and of which the shares were at present low and unnoticed. 'I am behind the scenes, Jack,' was his concluding paragraph, 'as in the old days — and I say, buy into the "Southern Cross" or the "Right Hand Pocket" for every shilling you can raise. If you don't, you'll repent it all your life, or my name isn't Frank Ferretter.'

'And why are you cast down, Mr. Quartzman?' said I, with the careless courage of youth. 'It ought to raise your spirits, I should say.'

'Because I am miserably undecided. I ought to back Frank up. He is a man of strict honour, an old friend, and so shrewd and clear-headed that I have never found him wrong. But I look round on these children, and haven't the heart to do anything that might imperil their well-being or the roof above their heads, poor as it is. But I ought. I *ought* to put five hundred pounds into one of these reefs, and I may be missing a chance now, perhaps a fortune, never to be offered to me again as long as I live.'

'Why not talk it over with your wife?' I asked.

'I *have* spoken of it to her,' he said, with a grave smile, 'but she has such a prejudice against mining speculations (I lost heavily by my last investment in that way) that she will hardly bear the subject mentioned. She conjured me, as I valued the welfare of my children, to have nothing whatever to do with it.'

'Let us have a council of war, then,' I suggested, 'and go warily over the whole plan of campaign.'

He assented, but without enthusiasm. However,

after breakfast next morning, we had our talk. Cousin Jane was, of course, present. I had been thinking over the matter since sunrise. A hard look came over her face when Sandhurst was casually referred to.

'I have had enough of mining ventures to last me all my lifetime, and I should think that you had too, John, unless you wish to be without a roof and a dinner *again*.'

'My dear Jane,' he answered, 'if you reflect for a moment you will see that we were never quite so hard up as that, though I will own that the "Great Intended" cleared me out in 186–, when the lower levels were flooded by those "Hand over Hand" ruffians.'

'I hate the very name of mining—shares and reefs and companies, they are all alike,' she said, more passionately than I had ever heard her speak, 'and shall do so to my dying day.'

'But won't you hear reason?' he said. 'Suppose a few hundreds would be sufficient to buy an interest in a real good thing, and we get back the twenty thousand pounds I lost, what then?'

'Why will you talk in that way, John, and break my heart? If it be a good thing, *you* will be sure to be out of it. You know you are unlucky in mining matters, and did nothing but lose in every venture you tried—since I knew you, at any rate. I can't think, for my part, how you ever *did* make any money.'

A pained look came over his face, then, with the old weary smile, he said sadly, 'Men spoke differently of John Quartzman once upon a time, and for many

a year too. I don't like my wife to lose all faith in my business capacity. The fact appears patent to me that shares in mining companies never were so low as now. A rise is certain, consequently *this* is the time to invest.'

'I have heard it said,' I interposed, before Cousin Jane had time to denounce the fiend of the mine and all his works, 'that more men are ruined by letting previous failures confuse their calculations than by imprudence. The player distrusts his system just when he should back it. The rise and fall of values must be calculable. It is *we* women, I fancy, who, over sanguine in success, mistake despondency in adversity for prudence.'

'Why, you are as bad as John,' said Cousin Jane. 'The world must surely be coming to an end when *you* advise him to gamble in mining shares.'

'I do not advise anything of the kind; but I wish him and you too to consider what may be the most important act of your life with calmness and without prejudice. Do what you will, accept or refuse, but decide upon reasonable grounds.'

'Well, John, you and Portia had better settle it between you. I wash my hands of it. However, I will say I never knew her wrong in anything, and all may come right this time.'

'Very well. Now, Mr. Quartzman, is your information really good?'

'I can trust Frank Ferretter as if he were my brother. I have proved his friendship in fair weather and foul.'

'Utterly trustworthy man — not likely to be taken in?'

'There does not live a miner from San Francisco to Hokitiki, and that's a wide word, that can teach him anything.'

'And the reef will either make the shareholders rich, or they lose every penny they invest?'

'That, of course. Limited liability, though. We are not liable for more than we put in.'

'Have you five hundred pounds available?'

'Yes; could just manage, with great scraping together, to lay my hand on that sum.'

'Then I advise you to buy in at once and I will invest the same sum. Draw on father for the amount in my name; he will honour it, I know. Then Jane, if I win, it will be all the better for Charlie.'

Mr. Quartzman looked half puzzled, half delighted. Jane regarded me evidently as a philanthropist whose intellect voluntary teaching had overthrown. We stared at each other, and finally burst out laughing. 'It's all right,' I said. 'I am as sane as usual, my dear Mrs. Quartzman.' We had been rather careless about Christian names lately. I then explained father's parting words.

'I'll wire Ferretter to buy in for the whole amount,' said Mr. Quartzman, who was the first to recover his faculties permanently. 'I am so delighted I can hardly speak. I feel quite another man again. I have a presentiment we shall win this time, wife! If we do, we shall be only adding a trifle to the national debt which we owe to St. Portia here.'

He kissed his wife, who stood half amazed, with a wondering smile on her face, and was gone.

Next day came a letter, such a kind one, from

daddy, saying that he sent a draft enclosed for the money, and that he believed the old Bendigo Deep Leads were going to have their turn at last, in which case the obsolete tradition of fortunes made in Victoria by mining would be revived. Except that mother and the girls felt the heat lately, their health was pretty good.

'Felt the heat, did they? I wonder what they would have thought of my low-roofed schoolroom?'

One evening I had kept in the children *pour cause* later in the day than I did generally. It was the last hot month. In the interior of Australia the languor of the whole summer, unrelieved by sea breezes, seems to culminate in the lingering pre-autumnal days. My pupils had been, perhaps, rather inattentive, so I had persevered past the usual time, and was still quietly, but unyieldingly, working up the irregular French verbs.

'There now, you may all go,' I said; 'you have given me a headache, I know. Do you think you know them well enough to say to-morrow?'

'Oh yes,' said Jenny, now a slender, fast-growing girl. 'I really do know them now, tiresome things; but does it always give you a headache when we are stupid, Miss Middleton?'

'Sometimes,' I said; 'and you'll try not to give me another this week.'

'I promise,' shouted Harold.

'So will I,' said Ethel. 'We all will. I feel lazy this hot weather, but I never will again if it's cruel.'

'Come and walk by the river, Miss Middleton,' said Harold. 'It's so cool there, and there's beautiful green moss and shady ferns, and I know a wood-

duck's nest up a tree. The young ones are gone now; I think she must have carried them away on her back.'

'Help me up, then,' I said. 'Oh, how tired I am! I shall be glad when the cool weather sets in.'

Languidly I pace the winding path that leads to the river, Harold holding one hand, and Jill disputing the other with Jack—Ethel running in front shouting 'River, river, flowing river!' at the top of her voice, when some one says, 'May I be of the party, if I am not too dusty and disagreeable?'

The children gave a shriek of delight, which informed me that Mr. Wharfedale had arrived, even before I turned and saw his bronzed face. He had been regarding us in a leisurely manner—it is impossible to say for how long—and upon my greeting him condescended to join us.

'I have just come by the coach,' he said, 'and am looking a fright, I know, as girls say—horribly tired too. But though I have been jolted about all night, I think, Miss Middleton, that you look more fagged than I do.'

There was a kind inflection in his voice that nearly made the tears come into my eyes. But I resisted the tendency fiercely. What does Nature mean by letting women make fools of themselves, in season and out of season, over and above their manifest opportunities in that line?

'You must have heard me lamenting my small woes,' I answered. 'It is a safety-valve we women make use of in private.'

'I don't wonder. Teaching must be atrociously trying this weather. Really it's hard work to live,

even when one has little or nothing to do. I find it so.'

Mr. Wharfedale underrated his occupation, his attainments, and his principles, always professing to do little, and to know nothing worth mentioning. He carried a dislike to egotism and pedantry to the opposite extreme.

'It's like all other work, I suppose,' I said, while we strolled nearer the broad river, and the children ran shouting forward to the shingly shallows, dabbling in the swift-flowing clear water, and plucking bulrushes and willow streamers; 'not half so bad when you're in it. And then the after taste is good.'

'I suppose nobody would be a governess, if they could help it,' he said reflectively, 'and yet, excepting those of artists or writers, there seems hardly any other occupation for gentlewomen whose parents are not rich or independent.'

'They ought to be thankful for that,' I said. 'It is honourable work, and provides the means of living. That should suffice, ought it not? Women are so easily contented, you know—not like men.'

'Now you are laughing, and I am serious. If you know how deeply I respect—how warmly I admire a woman whom I see unobtrusively doing her duty in the life which Fate has apportioned to her, you would not be sarcastic with me.'

'Thank you for your compliments. But do you mean to tell me that you have the same feeling of respect for Mrs. Quartzman's governess as you have for Marion Walsingham or the Clara Vere de Veres of Melbourne or Sydney?'

'As much respect? Far more, a thousandfold, if you will believe me. What constitutes a woman's patent of nobility, if culture of mind and refinement of nature do not? Self-denial for worthy ends is another factor in the sum. Who is more likely to possess these qualities—rare in both sexes—the spoiled child of fortune, who has never had a wish ungratified, or the patient worker, compelled to mould her will, and withstand her impulses?'

'Would not such a paragon border upon the strong-minded woman, that too successful product from which men, "uncertain, coy, and hard to please," instinctively flee.'

'I confess to talking nonsense occasionally,' he replied; 'who does not? When I was here last I must have been airing some of my favourite affectations. However, I have been rather the prey of the gods lately. I have had a wearisome overland journey, some indifferent luck, with a touch of fever and ague thrown in. If you see me more humble-minded than usual, it is not to be wondered at.'

'Mrs. Quartzman will wonder why we are so late for tea.' I feel it necessary to interpose. 'Children, come away from that island, *directly*. Do you hear, Harold? Never mind the kingfisher's nest on the bank. It's getting too late to see. Jack, don't fall off that log! Jill, it's naughty of you to wet your shoes and stockings! Ethel, look at the state of your frock!' And we walk quickly homewards.

We were again a happy family party that night, around our humble tea-table. Mr. Quartzman produced an inspiriting telegram from Mr. Ferretter: 'Just in time with your thou' (thus he expressed

that modest morsel of capital) 'Etna and Vesuvius going up like smoke' (code names he explained). The cooled Reisling had been produced, and in this he was about to drink my health, and make embarrassing statements, when I looked over at him so imploringly that he, being a person of quick apprehension—much as Cousin Jane doubted the fact—turned the conversation to a general congratulation of himself and his luck in this instance.

'Why, Quartzman!' said Mr. Wharfedale, 'you are getting like your old self again. No longer "wasting in despair," but with pluck enough to have a flying shot at good investments. Nothing like perseverance. Delighted to see your shares are up. Quite a flavour of old times, eh, Mrs. Quartzman?'

That matron looked first at her husband, then at me, and, finally, with a pleased, mysterious expression at Mr. Wharfedale, who could not think what it all meant.

'Miss Middleton does not approve, perhaps, of such a bold venture in shares?' he said smilingly; 'but Mrs. Quartzman knows, none better, that seeming rashness in mining matters is often the truest wisdom.'

'I can't say John acted upon my advice this time,' that lady said humbly. 'I am delighted though, that it has turned out so well.'

'Better and better,' he said; 'acted on his own judgment, with both the ladies against him – for I feel certain he asked Miss Middleton's advice if she was in the house when he thought it over. I know his respect for her opinion. Now, didn't he, Miss Middleton?'

'He certainly did,' I said, blushing, in spite of myself.

'And *then* went and bought in with noble obstinacy after all. I really didn't think him such a brilliant operator. I revere a man who believes in himself.'

'Don't you think the principle may be carried too far?' I asked, suppressing a strong inclination to laugh at the ingenious self-mystification of my masterful acquaintance.

'Hardly ever—excuse the slang,' he said, 'but it's so hard to say anything without quoting *Pinafore*. I forgot, though, you haven't had the opportunity of hearing that comic miracle.'

'No, indeed!' said Cousin Jane, boiling over with the sense of the injustice of my being thus ignored; 'Miss Middleton is buried up here from year's end to year's end, and never has the chance of seeing anybody or hearing anything. I think it's a great shame.'

'So it is, when you come to think of it,' said Mr. Wharfedale, rather wondering at this excessive consideration for 'a young person,' 'but you must consider that *you* are also secluded from pleasures and palaces.'

'That is of very little consequence,' said Jane, with true humility. Long and hopelessly impoverished, therefore permanently doomed to Waronga, or other purgatorial provinces, she was past pitying herself, but felt at the same time exasperated that she could not wither up her guest's indifferentism by suddenly disclosing my real virtues, or, what alike in kingdom and colony stands for the same thing, the wealth

of my dear old daddy. Foiled, however, in this generous purpose by her promise to me, which I did not allow her to forget, she betook herself to bed rather suddenly. I was not sorry to retire at the same time, leaving Mr. Quartzman and his friend to their pipes and confidences.

Mr. Wharfedale only remained for a few days on this occasion, having affairs in Melbourne which interfered with the 'lazy ally' business he professed so deeply to appreciate. I could not help thinking there was a difference in his manner since he had left Waronga last. Something had occurred to soften him. He spoke more tolerantly of the shortcomings of others, less decisively of his own opinions. One day he paid me the compliment of making the same observation as far as I was concerned.

'Perhaps you will permit me, Miss Middleton, to say that I see a difference in *your* style since last year. You are less fixed in your convictions—is it not so?—less warlike in your dislike of indifferentist tendencies.'

'I am only like the rest of the world then,' I answered. 'I had a difficult task to perform when I arrived, and I braced myself for the occasion. I may have relaxed a little, now that the battle is over, who knows?'

'If you only knew how doubt and diffidence increase the charm of womanhood, you would make fresh concessions.'

'And lose my self-respect!' I said; 'not for a century of idle admiration, if, indeed, so unlikely an experience should come my way. When a man sees his duty clearly, and lets nothing interfere with its

accomplishment, he is thought to have done something noble. Why not allow the same meed of praise to a woman?'

'*He* is not told that he would be better loved if he were less true to his ideal. He would despise the speaker if he were. I have little patience with such half-contemptuous flatteries of women. It makes them the silly dolls or ineffective workers that half of them are.'

'But yet the softer attributes,' pleaded he, with a malicious twinkle in his eye, 'have from time immemorial been sacred to the fairer half of creation.'

'You are trying to provoke me, Mr. Wharfedale,' said I, mortified at being placed in a false position, 'but if good temper be considered a softer attribute, it is more frequently found among the cultured section of the sex than among the sweetly smiling simpletons by whom men say they are attracted.'

'Please not to be angry, only hurt at my obtuseness,' he said, with a peculiar air of gratification, as of one who is pacifying a child. 'I am really on the road to conversion—obstinate as some people find me. I know you can keep counsel, Miss Middleton, for Quartzman told me. Shall I confess why I returned to Waronga, overland too—in this scorching summer?' he continued, fixing his deep eye on me, now lighted by a warmer glow than I had ever seen there.

'To see Mr. and Mrs. Quartzman. They are your true friends—glad to greet you and sad when you depart.'

'We are more than friends in name,' he said, 'and

for that reason I shall always be grateful to a benefactress who, in their children's training and their household happiness, has done them an invaluable service. She may have regarded it as an ordinary contract, and as such to be compensated. Payment! nothing could recompense such benefits.'

'You can't mean that, Mr. Wharfedale,' I gasped out. 'Why, every governess undertakes——'

'You must not—pardon me, Miss Middleton—undervalue gifts as rare as priceless, rare as the mind that designed the heart that offered them. Believe me, under a mocking manner, I have noticed your unselfish labours, your brave battling with discomfort from the first. You aroused a fresh interest in me (pray let me speak on) from the time of our first meeting, an interest which has since deepened into the love of Hugh Wharfedale, which he now offers you.'

I looked at him in amazement. I stood spell-bound. I conscientiously declare that I *was* honestly surprised if ever a girl was under the circumstances. My head was so filled with education and abstract ideas that there was no room, I suppose, for the self-conscious, indolent, introspective pastime for an empty brain and an over-excited sensibility, commonly dignified by the name of love.

'You surely will not tell me,' he said, in softly reproachful accents, 'that you *never* thought of me in this relation for one moment? You look as if the idea was untenable; or am I so unhappy as to have incurred your disapproval?' Here the haughty face became set and rigid.

'Oh! it's not that,' I said hastily, as I began to

confess to myself that I had always admired, respected, placed him mentally on a pedestal, as the nearest available demi-god, and so on.

But it had so little occurred to me that he, the unapproachable Hugh Wharfedale, would ever be likely, as he was now actually doing, to propose to an unattractive girl like myself—a mere governess—that I was very nearly turning away and saying in the haste of instinctive feminine evasion, 'it can never be,' or some such untruthful denial of pure and honest liking. I swear I had no love for him *then*. But have I not *now*? Yes, enough for a conversazione of wives! Then a voice with low tones of reason, not emotion, kept on saying, 'Why throw away happiness, power, success, the natural rank and position of wedded womanhood.'

I looked full in his face. Our eyes met. I saw in those dusky fires an indescribable expression of strong tenderness, manful kindness, kingly protection; I bowed my head in token of surrender, until it seemed quite natural, and by no means dreadful, that the said head was pillowed on his broad breast.

'I must tell my dear mother,' I said at length, 'and father too. How wicked of me to have forgotten them!'

'Ah! of course,' he said, in the tone which showed me that he could not help thinking *their* consent a foregone conclusion.

'Governesses have fathers and mothers, you know,' I said, smiling at the surprise that was in store for him.

'I shall always revere them,' he said, and his

voice *really* trembled, 'as the wise and loving ones who made my treasure what she is.'

'And you will never allow people to sneer at governesses before me?' I said softly.

He smiled. 'People will not sneer at *my* wife, darling!'

'But surely *you* are above such small—such paltry prejudices.'

'Now, suppose I told you a secret,' I whispered, 'that I am not a governess at all, though a teacher.'

'I dislike mysteries,' he said shortly, and I thereupon resolved not to be playful till I knew my ground. 'And what are you, then?' he continued.

'I am not a governess,' I replied, 'I am a young lady.'

'Permit me to remark,' he said, still looking keenly at me, 'that I am well satisfied of that fact, or our present relation would scarcely have existed. I presume you did not do anything very wicked, which necessitated your exile to Waronga?'

'I only mean to say—and you are not to look at me like that, sir—that I came up here to live with Cousin Jane Quartzman of my own free will, and because she was poor—and—needed help——' Here I disgracefully began to cry.

'Great Heaven! and do you mean to tell me that you came voluntarily, chose to live in this hot, dull, out-of-the-way place; to share the privations of my poor friends here for nearly two years, all *pour l'amour de Dieu* and true womanly kindness? I, who believed so little in goodness, taking it for

granted too, that you were merely working for pay like every other governess. I honoured you all the more for it. I will say that for myself. Thank heaven! I told you of my love before I knew all. But I will never forgive Mrs. Quartzman. Why didn't she tell me?'

'I had her promise not to do so. I had a foolish fancy for mortifying the flesh after that fashion, and keeping free from condolences by remaining incognita.'

There is little more to add. These jottings down of the small incidents of my uneventful career are nearly at an end.

Mr. Quartzman and Cousin Jane were transported with delight when they heard of my stupendous good fortune, as they evidently considered it to be. The former, apropos of another telegram received from the faithful Ferretter, in which the shares in the Right Hand Pocket were stated as having fabulously risen, insisted upon relating my share in the famous council of war. Again, in imagination, he and Cousin Jane saw themselves replaced in their former station of social rank and consideration, with a house in town, the boys at good schools, the girls provided with masters, music, and drawing-lessons—all the hardly-borne privations fading rapidly out of memory and regret. The unavoidable misfortune of losing Portia Middleton was swallowed up in an ocean of new hopes and pardonable fancies.

I shortly regained the family circle in Melbourne, to be welcomed as a sort of lost Pleiad, and to become the centre of a host of admiring friends and relatives; more particularly after Hugh—my Hugh

—had undergone an indispensable interview in daddy's study.

'Who would have thought Portia would have made the match of the season?' said Jessie; 'all through insisting upon going to that frightful Waronga, and helping Cousin Jane, too! The idea of meeting that delightful Hugh Wharfedale *there* above all people! I never dreamed the Quartzmans had ever heard his name.'

'The good things of this world are promised to those who do their duty,' said mother reflectively. 'Why should we wonder at what we have read in the Bible coming true? But we all of us read it a good deal, and practise it very little, I am afraid.'

'And Hugh declared at Mrs. Hauton's, last year,' said Isabella, 'that he hated governesses. You know you did,' she added, as the individual referred to entered the room, 'say you hated governesses—didn't you?'

'Once for all I plead guilty to having talked nonsense in my time. How could I know,' he continued, possessing himself of my hand, 'that Fate was even then arranging that my happiness should be placed in the safe charge of the "Governess of the Poets"—the ideal governess, if ever there was one.'

OUR NEW COOK

A TALE OF THE TIMES

CHAPTER I

I WAS at my wits' end. I was almost at the conclusion of my stay in town. I had been searching diligently from the first day of my arrival for a young woman (we had had enough of old ones) who would consent, for a liberal wage, to proceed to Bundaburramah, and there go through the form of cooking our food. I say, go through the form. My wife and I, taught by long intervals of self-help, were not exacting. I could broil chops and steaks fairly well. I could put a piece of corned beef into a pot, and leave it to simmer when I retired for the night. I could manage potatoes. But my free spirit rebelled at the 'washing up.' The half-used plates and dishes were to me as things loathsome. They operated prejudicially upon my dinners in prospect even, as well as upon those which had 'gone before.' So, as a man, a gentleman, and a squatter, I 'jacked up' at the cookery.

My poor Isabel tried it many times; and I am bound to say, as a truthful though oppressed employer, accomplished miracles. But the children could not be kept out of the kitchen when mamma was so delightfully engaged. Narrow escapes occurred of cremation of little dresses, and the little treasures

contained therein. And how could I bear to find my dainty darling, hot, uncomfortable, and perfumed as to her peerless person, not with lavender or mille-fleurs, but actually, as her younger brother roughly expressed it, 'smelling of fat'?

We tried men cooks, but they were surly or drunken. We placed occasionally adjacent bush-girls between us and the unwonted toils and miseries. They augmented the toils by their awkwardness. They sharpened the misery by their waste, extravagance, and sudden abscondings. And this is how it all came to pass.

While at our worst, I received a sudden summons to town on business.

'I am sorry to leave you, my dearest,' said I, as I bade farewell to my tearful wife. 'I feel almost cowardly in going away to a region where cooks can still be obtained for money. I shall, in spite of myself, be revelling in hotel banquets, and real actual dinners (not meals); while you, my poor darling, will be dwelling in the desert alone, subsisting upon the burned chop, the underdone "gigot," the unleavened bread. My heart bleeds for you. Why did I ever marry you?' Here the mail, which passes our door, came rapidly towards us.

'Oh, Edward!' said she, hiding her face in my breast, 'don't say such dreadful things. But you *will* bring up a cook from town, won't you, like a dear? I am willing to do my best, but I am almost worn out.' Here the up-mail drove up.

'If I do not,' said I, 'may I—' here I swore an oath, *not* too dreadful to repeat, for I remembered I was a family man, and member of the local school

board, in the midst of my natural indignation—'be forced to sell Bundaburramah, and turn mining agent, stockbroker, or even member of parliament. If I do return alive, and if there is only one cook in the whole metropolis, that cook shall be yours.'

She thanked me with one half-bright glance from her tender brown eyes. I climbed to the box seat, the impatient leader reared, the off-side wheeler stubbornly refused to move, the near-side one gave a playful kick, and in about ten minutes we were fairly off.

I reached the metropolis after a journey during which even the modest fare of the roadside inns appeared to me in the light of astonishing delicacies, so unaccustomed had I been, of late, to the most rudimentary results of the culinary art. I may mention that I had not left Bundaburramah for three years previously; domestic difficulties, and a certain disobligingness on the part of my banker, being both in favour of home-keeping. Though the latter conflicting element was in a state of unwonted rest, the domestic difficulties were as sharp as ever. The general prosperity seemed to have intensified them. What was the use of my getting grand prices for my wool and sheep if my wife was to be the slave of the lamp, as the man says in the *Arabian Nights*, or, rather, of the saucepan?—flesh and blood couldn't stand it. I am a moderate man, and believe in the liberty of the subject, and all that, but fancy a cargo of nice strong young slaves just arrived, with a score of cooks among them! Wouldn't I have bid up? Yes, I grieve to say—like Mr. Salem Scudder himself.

I was almost comforted when we pulled up, or rather, the train stopped at the refreshment station on the mountains. 'Come,' I said to myself, 'this is something like. Here is no violent contrast here to shock the consciences of men long ignorant of cooks! The Government have shown their usual delicacy of feeling. Nothing but bread and butter, the mature sandwich, the almost warm tea and coffee. No wicked wine or spirits.' I fed uncomfortably, as I had done for years, and felt free from the crime of wallowing in luxury, while my absent spouse was alternately starving or suffering from indigestion.

Sydney at length. More temptation, with the usual human result—more indulgence. I sinned and sorrowed. Daily I feasted on fish, soup, and entrées, nightly I bewailed my guilty pleasure, and excused myself to my absent sufferer, by ingenious explanations, in which figured the recovery of a lost palate, and a stern determination to wrest a cook from the clutches of the registry office-keepers, or to stay in Sydney till I did.

To this end I visited every one of those remarkable establishments, where domestics have of late years condescended to meet for the purpose of selecting employers. Daily I presented myself for inspection by the proud daughters of the kitchen—alas! unavailingly.

My appearance, I flatter myself, is not unimpressive. A judicious mixture of paternal benevolence, with the merest *soupçon* of dignity, has always marked my manner, more especially with the younger and better-looking female domestics. Wages, if not

altogether 'of no object,' were decidedly liberal. The duties certainly comprised a fair knowledge of cookery, but the sum was not high. No willing student of ordinary intelligence could be plucked. We saw no company. Old Jubley, P.M., once a month, a wandering squatter, and a rare inspector of stock, were our only guests.

I did not particularly care what they got, as I, in my turn, took my chance of compulsory pot-luck when travelling. 'Why then this morbid hatred of the fox? Why did I always break down on the cross-examination? Why was the invariable answer of the young and giggling, the middle-aged and wary, the old and vinous aspirant, "That she was afraid the place wouldn't suit"?' In other words, why couldn't I get a cook? The distance, no doubt, was the fatal objection—two hundred and twenty miles. I couldn't decently make it less than that, though I softened the last mail stage. Then the name—Bundaburramah—confound it! it *had* the smack of the Lower Darling.

I thought seriously of changing it into Belvoir, or Hampton Court, when I saw the effect it had upon the countenances of the most likely candidates. The way the more smartly dressed among them used to bring out, 'The bush! oh! I'm afraid it's a great deal too far off.'

Some made such a point of going to church regularly every Sunday, that I regretted that I had not subscribed munificently to that Wesleyan edifice, which might have been completed now, under other circumstances; that is, if there had been a sufficiency of Wesleyans in the neighbourhood, which it after-

wards turned out there were not. For the first few days, I did not mind it so much ; I went as a regular thing to the next registry office on my list. I had checked them all down in my pocket-book. I was, indeed, so constant an attendant at these exasperating domestic clubs, popularly supposed to tend to the distribution of servants, but in reality being secret societies for the circulation of gossip, and the intimidation of employers, that I began to be taken for a relation of some of the young persons. Little notice was therefore bestowed upon me, and I heard as many pieces of private intelligence and unmasked conversation, bearing upon the manners and customs of the species female servant, as if I had been the 'amateur casual' himself. I was not, however, as yet satiated with the pleasures of the metropolis, and day by day I resumed my stereotyped inquiry of the politely indifferent lady registrars, and kept guard for the regulation period until we all (I was getting quite identified with the ways of the societies) went home to lunch, after which, few of us troubled the institution again that day.

Obviously, however, this mode of life could not last for ever. I had merged my whole existence and staked my reputation for success upon this mad quest for a cook.

From that fleeting delusive form I was apparently as far as the crowd of fated worshippers in Noel Paton's grand picture, 'The Pursuit of Pleasure.' I could, perhaps, have supported the *ennui* and fatigue of another month's quest with the aid of fresh and congenial society, the theatres and concerts by night, an occasional voyage to Manly Beach and the Garden

promenade. But other forces began to manifest themselves. My wife's letters, at first full of sympathy with my ardent pursuit, began to show first incredulity, then disapproval.

'She was afraid I was not trying in earnest, or else I must have got a cook by this time. Then, was I going to take up my abode in Sydney altogether, and leave my family and the station to take care of itself? She must say she thought it strange, to say the least of it, that I should have been in Sydney a whole month and have done nothing. If I did not return soon, she thought she would start down with the children in the mail. Besides, there had been a bush-fire, some of the sheep were away, and she was afraid the overseer had been drinking.'

Alas! alas! (as I am writing and not talking I may make use of this interjection) how my enjoyment shrivelled up, as grass before a bush-fire, under the last paragraph! Human nature *is* weak.

Here had I gone on, patiently searching for this philosopher's stone of a cook, while my stock was decreasing, my wife becoming deranged, and my overseer in a chronic state of delirium tremens. I knew that nothing short of this stage would have aroused her suspicions. Off I must go, cookless and hopeless, by Saturday's mail. Words fail to describe my humiliation and despair. 'Why did I not marry a cook?' I asked myself in my agony. I have seen those of that persuasion that were fair to look upon. Then should I have been saved this anguish, this degradation, this mental, physical, moral, most complicated misery!

Friday arrived. I had advertised from the first

day of my visit, directing applicants, with bitter irony, to call between nine and ten o'clock at the Royal Hotel, that being the hour when I am immersed in the morning papers. I was not reading, far from it, but, with corrugated brow, considering how many of my commissions, left to the last moment, it would be safe to neglect, when, enter the waiter.

'A young person has called, sir, about the situation as cook.'

'What!' said I, 'show in the angel—I mean the young woman.' In a few moments, however, my spirits fell—'She will leave me, as other hopes have left before,' I murmured; 'why should I be so ridiculous as to expect anything but disappointment, a little more ingenious than usual? Here she comes.'

The door opened. A young woman of twenty, very quietly dressed, presented herself, with an air of slight timidity, rather different from the assured elegance to which I had been accustomed.

'Pray take a chair,' said I. 'I understood that you had come with reference to my advertisement for a cook?'

'Mr. Steadman,' said she, 'of Bundaburramah?' inquiringly.

'The same,' said I, breaking out into a cold perspiration—(She's going to ask whether it is at the North Shore, or what the distance from town is).

She did nothing of the sort. She took from her black bag a letter which she handed to me. As soon as my trepidation permitted, I read it. I knew the handwriting well. It was from a dear old family friend, who had known me from a boy, a lady, though of warm benevolence, not less noted for clear-sighted

dislike to imposition. It ran as follows: 'I willingly testify that Mary Dale has a thorough practical knowledge of cookery. I consider her likely to prove valuable to any family in which she may engage herself. I have known her for some years, and vouch for her perfect trustworthiness.'

I looked up from this document as the ruined heir lifts his eyes from his grandfather's long-lost (favourable) will. My glance encountered a look of mingled expectation and anxiety. The face itself was a good one. Clear dark eyes, fair features, well-kept, neatly-arranged hair. 'Fully good-looking enough,' thought I; 'thorough knowledge of cooking —too good to be true—must end in failure.'

'Hem—ha!' said I. 'Very good character Mrs. Longworth gives you here. How long will you engage for? Not less than six months?'

'I am willing to engage myself for twelve months,' said she.

I gave myself a severe pinch at this statement. I must be dreaming, or is she an escaped lunatic? Or, somehow, the wording of Mrs. Longworth's letter is rather ambiguous. No allusion to other places. Is there anything—hum—ha?

'You have been cook in other families, I suppose?' said I, with an easy air of unconcern. 'Where Mrs. Longworth acquired her knowledge of you?

She was slightly confused, as I thought, for a moment, then looked up and said steadily:

'I have never been away from home before; but I can cook very fairly, as Mrs. Longworth has kindly stated. If you do not approve of my work after a month, you need not pay me.'

I hesitated, only for a moment. There *was* a little mystery ; but in one second there flashed across my mind the tremendous extent, the ruinous depth of the domestic gap that this female Curtius was volunteering to close by self-sacrifice. I looked at her clear eyes and earnest face. I call myself a bit of a physiognomist. The die was cast.

'It is arranged,' I said. 'Our wages are so-and-so for twelve months.'

She inclined her head.

'Will you meet me with your trunk at the terminus at five o'clock to-morrow afternoon?'

'I shall be sure to be punctual, sir,' she said, in a pleased voice, and departed.

I never missed a train in my life, though not punctual to a fault. I sometimes linger, I often procrastinate. But I contrive to energise as the time grows short. I double the cabman's fare. I omit my least important (family) commissions. By this process of addition and subtraction, I have hitherto avoided failure.

But on this momentous occasion I ran no imprudent risks. There are moments in life when, stupendous issues being involved, no sane man leaves anything to chance.

I was more than prepared. I went down to the terminus after breakfast, and set my watch by the railway time. I mustered my parcels in the most methodical way, and arrived with them hours beforehand. I dined sparingly, lest caution should be lulled by liquor, and half an hour before the five-twenty train, I was wandering up and down the platform, arousing the interest of the railway officials.

One of them, expectant of subsidy, touched his hat, as he asked, pointing to my luggage, which included bandboxes—'Was there a lady in the case?' 'Yes, there was.'

The appointed time drew nigh; but five minutes, at the expiration of which the inexorable train would start. Already the warning cry of 'Take your seats for ———' was heard. Anxious or timid passengers hastened to ensconce themselves in the carriages. I had taken two first-class tickets; I had seen my multifarious packages, comprising all things indispensable to the home-returning paterfamilias, from a crate of crockery to a box of toys, safely bestowed. I am aware that second-class accommodation is usually considered suitable for domestic servants; but I was not going to be trammelled by the usages of a bygone state of society, where cooks were doubtless plentiful and easy to replace. No! Was I to run the risk of a headlong proposal from a fortunate miner? An offer of double wages from a desperate employer like myself? No! By the recollection of my past anguish, by the dread of a servantless period to come, I would run no insane risks. 'Safe bind, safe find.' Once in my charge, this gifted maiden should be guarded and cherished as a ward in Chancery, until I deposited her with triumph in the kitchen at Bundaburramah. But *was* she coming after all? Agonising doubt! I felt as if the disappointment would shatter my overtasked faculties.

All fears on that score were set at rest by the appearance of the inestimable maid, accompanied by an elderly woman of great respectability of aspect, who looked at me keenly, as I hurriedly advanced.

I could have clasped her (our new cook, I mean) in my arms. But I controlled all outward signs of joy, and calling a porter directed him to take charge of the moderate-sized trunk that the cabman deposited on the pavement.

'Here is your ticket; perhaps you had better take your seat,' said I, leading the way to a saloon carriage.

'I am sorry to be late,' said she; 'but I am quite ready now. Good-bye!' Here she spoke in low tones to the elderly person, who by this time, from the attention she bestowed upon me, must have had a correct mental photograph of my features and expression.

'You can tell them you saw me safely off.'

'Good-bye, my dear child,' said the old woman.

I discovered no family likeness. I opened the carriage door a little impatiently, pointing out an unoccupied corner, of which Mary quietly took possession—the signal sounded, and, joy of joys! we were off.

When the 'gentlemanly' dealer in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who bought his slaves in small parcels, a wife here, a husband there, a child somewhere else, as prices suited, had got his valuable lots safely on board the steamer, he (erroneously, as it turned out) relaxed his watchfulness, under the impression that they couldn't very well get way. Here let me remark that I at least never for a moment wondered why the Southerners fought so desperately for their slaves. Could I not enter into their feelings? Had I been possessed of—say inherited—a good cook or two, a housemaid, a prize laundress, would I not have shed

the last drop of blood ere they should be torn from me. Don't tell me! human nature is the same everywhere. Wilberforce himself would have done it, had he been the prey of servants and the scorn of registry offices.

But *revenons à nos moutons*, or to the artist mostly concerned with the *post-mortem* experiments made on their hapless bodies.

I sat within a convenient distance of my prize, and only occasionally satisfied myself by a cautious glance that she was there. I fancied that a look of regret had succeeded the one of quiet determination which I had remarked upon her face as she ascended the platform. 'Only natural,' thought I; 'but she can't well draw back now. She doesn't look the sort of damsel to burst into tears, and entreat to be sent back to her mother. No! I think I've made a hit for once. Quietly dressed, in a well-fitting, almost too plain material. Gloves, yes; all the world wears gloves now; a pair of half-worn gauntlets, very sensible. Hat, unobtrusive; veil, thick and defensive. Hem! most unexceptional attire.'

Worn out by my late severe mental conflicts, I must have dozed, for I was suddenly awakened by the stopping of the train at the half-way station, where refreshments are popularly supposed to be obtainable. I went over to her. 'Mary,' said I, 'do you feel hungry? would you like anything to eat or drink?'

She started slightly as I spoke; then with an effort, said, 'Thank you, Mr. Steadman, I should like a cup of coffee.' The refreshment was procured,

and I thought it a suitable occasion to ask if she felt rested, and ready to take the coach journey, which commenced at midnight.

'Thank you,' she said, 'I am quite well, and I daresay I can manage it.'

CHAPTER II

I OBSERVED that she disposed of the sandwich with evident appetite. 'Good constitution,' thought I; 'persons who can't eat can't work—a good appetite goes along with good temper and a reasonable habit of mind. Indigestion is another name for irritable nerves, which mean—the devil, and all his works.'

I continued my paternal care during the coach journey, and at the roadside inns where we put up. The demeanour of my domestic was marked by gravity and seriousness even beyond her years. But occasionally I noticed a sudden expression, an appreciation of bits of scenery, an amused look as she read in a book with which she came provided, which, while not detracting from the respectful admiration with which I regarded her, led to doubts as to the light in which these traits would be looked upon by Mrs. Steadman. In fact, as we came nearer home, mild misgivings, deepening into fears, arose in my mind, as I pictured my introduction of this *very* good-looking and well-mannered young woman. I knew the hard criticisms, the groundless suspicions of the best, the most sensible of women, where their own sex is concerned. However, I sternly beat down these ungrateful feelings. 'Pooh!' said I to

myself, 'haven't I got my dear old Mrs. Longworth's guarantee, worth a score of any one else's. She *can* cook, at any rate. Everything else is the merest bagatelle.'

In this liberal and intrepid state of mind I found myself, as we drove up, on a fine sunshiny morning (nothing very unusual in that), to the Bundaburramah homestead. My heart began to beat a little. Was everything well at home? No sudden illness. No child tumbled into a waterbutt. No 'smash' among the sheep. All kinds of possibilities occurred to me.

'What a pretty spot!' said the new cook suddenly. 'I had no idea there were such nice places in the bush. I am sure I could be very happy here.'

'I hope you will, Mary,' said I, with the deepest sincerity; 'and your—er—mistress and I will do everything in our power to make you comfortable.'

She smiled, as if her train of thought had been casually interrupted, and then answered, 'I hope I shall be happy and contented here, sir. I will do my best, I promise you.'

'Thank you,' said I, and our existence as fellow-travellers terminated, as I jumped down and was embraced by my family, with a warmth proportioned to the length of my absence and the success of my efforts.

'This is the—er—Mary Dale,' said I to my wife. I could not say the cook, somehow.

'Oh! very well,' said the partner of my cares, with no great display of feeling. 'Come with me, Mary, and I will show you your bedroom and kitchen.'

I had brief time for conversation just then. In half an hour I was in the saddle, and the moon was up before my overseer and I returned from our rounds. After the evening meal was over, and just a slight suspicion of drowsiness was creeping over me, my wife fixed her eyes upon me, in rather a searching manner, and thus commenced—

'Now, don't go to sleep, Edward, the moment you come home. I want to speak to you about the new cook.'

'Good Heavens!' said I, sitting bolt upright. 'She's given warning—says the place doesn't suit her? Don't tell me another word! And yet, I *did* think she was better than the ordinary run of girls. Confound all!'

'Now don't swear, Edward,' interrupted my wife. 'You appear to be very much concerned about her. Just answer me this,' and the little woman looked like a valiant pigeon which has just cast away all mildness of demeanour, and pecks ferociously at your finger. 'Did you ever see her before she answered the advertisement?'

'Of course not,' said I testily. 'How could I? I was very glad to see her *then*, I promise you.'

'I daresay; are you *quite* sure you never saw or heard of her before? Oh, Edward!' said the little woman, relinquishing her expression of stern investigation, and seizing my hand in hers, while the tears came into her eyes, 'why, that *girl is a lady!*'

'Suppose she is,' said I coolly, 'how does that concern us? She evidently can perform the duties she has engaged for—witness those chops; best I've had since I left town.'

'Oh, Edward, Edward!' pleaded the perplexed advocate, now driven to her last entrenchments. 'You know what I mean. There must be some mystery about her. For what I know, she may be —I don't know what. And I'm to take her into my family, and the dear children. Oh—oh!'

Here the undefined picture of mysterious danger became too painful, and my helpmate broke down utterly, and sobbed upon my manly breast. I soothed her.

'Dearest little woman, and best of wives, don't you think you're going rather too fast? We have Mrs. Longworth's certificate of character, and you always said how wise as well as benevolent she was. No taking *her* in, you know.'

'Still, this once,' remonstrated the unconvinced.

'I have a great mind to say,' I replied, 'that women are always suspicious, and so pay their sex a bad compliment. Men are more trustful; and they must necessarily have seen *much more* of the bad side of human nature than any good woman. Now, do you think you are doing your duty to your neighbour, by first of all unreasonably suspecting the girl of concealed evil, and following it up by the actual injury of dismissal? For, of course, she must go, if you insist upon it.'

'Well, but, Edward, what reason *can* she have, with her appearance and manner? though nothing could be plainer or in better taste than her dress, and she hasn't an ornament. She *is* a lady, or I never saw one.'

'Perhaps she is poor; perhaps she has a father in a lunatic asylum; perhaps her brother has broken

his back, and her grandmother is bedridden ; perhaps she wants to help her mother, who *may* keep a boarding-house ; perhaps she is a romantic goose (though she doesn't look it) who wants to prove that in any station we may be respected ; perhaps——'

'That will do, sir,' interrupted my mollified tyrant, stopping my mouth with an unanswerable argument. 'Perhaps I have been a silly, uncharitable little woman, saying my prayers, but not acting them out in real life. You always bring me round somehow, with that clever tongue of yours. I'll promise to do my duty, and to help her in all ways, and if she really is a good girl——'

'And a good cook,' said I, frowning sternly. 'I will have my pound of flesh. Then we shall get on very well, and be happy for a whole year. Think of that!'

'Think of that!' echoed the little woman, clapping her hands.

On my next return from my daily jog round the run, I made an ejaculation at the altered appearance of our humble table. There was a delicious salmi ; there were one or two slight but artistic compositions ; there was a simple but novel rendering of the inevitable *pommes de terre*—in short, it was a minute and accurate section of a Parisian dinner, such as I had read of.

'For what we are about to, etc.—shall I include the cook, my dear?'

'Don't be profane, Edward,' said my wife gravely ; 'but really,' added she, breaking into an approving smile, 'I am quite *charmed* with our new

domestic. She is such a manager, so neat and careful, and so beautifully clean. She told me she had some lessons at a school for cookery, which has been lately established. It does not take her half her time to do her work, and she told me she should be glad of some sewing to do in her leisure hours. What a help that will be with the dear children's dresses! for here's the summer coming on, and I haven't a cool frock even cut out yet.'

'All very well,' said I. 'But don't you think, really, that there may be a little risk. She may be—eh?'

'Come, come, sir! you're laughing at me now. No! I'm converted, and content to take her as she is, and make no impertinent inquiries; in fact, conduct myself like a lady, in spite of her being one.'

'I suppose she was quite knocked up after all this?' inquired I, finishing the potatoes *à la maître d'hotel.*

'Knocked up! I really believe she could cook a dinner in a drawing-room. It's all method, arrangement, and accurate weighing of materials (as she says). I couldn't have believed that such a dinner could have been turned out with so little effort.'

'How lucky for us that she had sense enough to attend these said cookery classes! How much more rational than devoting hours of fruitless labour in acquiring that very limited knowledge of music which a girl generally gets.'

'Every lady should play a little and sing if she has a voice,' said my wife, with decision. 'But oh, what would it not have saved me, if I had been taught like this girl?'

'Well, my dear,' said I, closing the conversation with a practical suggestion, 'as we are so fortunate in our domestic arrangements, let us endeavour to keep so. You understand?'

'I understand, sir,' said the châtelaine archly. 'I know that you think we women have no self-control. Do you always restrain your feelings and keep back your words?'

'Women are capable of such superb emotional repression in certain directions,' said I, 'that it has always grieved me that they should ever fall short in the management of their domestics. This I state as a general proposition, of course.'

'Of course; well, I feel as if I were going to be good and happy, and everything that could be wished now that we have such a charming cook.'

. . . . . .

About this period, happiness had evidently alighted upon the humble roof-tree of Edward Steadman.

It was a lonely place, as stations are apt to be, and in the long days, when I was necessarily absent, my wife had often suffered from being too much alone. Of visitable neighbours we had hardly one. Our small establishment had been built half a mile away from the station huts, so that the overseer and station hands were rarely near the cottage. When they did come, to be paid off, or the like, they were not suffered to enter the kitchen. An order to that effect had been long issued—as it was found inexpedient to have Currajong Jack, or other bush celebrities, lounging about the fireplace smoking, when the mistress of the house was giving orders, or personally preparing the frugal meal.

This obviated any little difficulty which our new cook might have met in a bush kitchen. This apartment she renovated, and beautified till it was quite a pleasant room in the coldish autumn evenings, or, later on, in the frosty winter nights. For we have frosts, and sharp ones too, in the bracing climate of Bundaburramah. All the real work seemed to be done before mid-day, when, with the neatest of morning dresses, and a protecting apron, this mysterious domestic flitted fairy-like among her beautifully clean saucepans and stewpans, placing therein arithmetically correct quantities of meat, vegetables, herbs, and spices, in a way which gave an appetite even before the culinary process set in.

'You seem wonderfully particular with your weights and measures,' said I, as I looked in one day, after an accidentally early return. 'I thought high-art cooking was more poetical, and not so mathematical; throwing in a flavour here and a little material there, with the careless inspiration of the moment.'

'Cookery resembles poetry in one respect,' she answered, without looking up from her work, 'that a false quantity does damage in either case.'

I smiled, perhaps a little mischievously, like a schoolboy who has discovered a sensational secret; as she looked up our eyes met, and her face was suffused with a glow, certainly not derived from the heat of the fire.

'Mr. Steadman,' she said, with a quiet air of reproof, 'cookery and conversation cannot be carried on without discomfort, slight perhaps, but not less marked, to the—person cooking.'

'Pray excuse me,' said I, as I prepared to depart. 'I should be very sorry to pain you in the slightest degree. Surely you will acquit me of any desire to do so.'

'I know that,' she said quickly, 'you have been most kind and truly considerate; don't think that I do not see it; but—sometimes—I feel——'

'Don't trouble yourself to explain anything. Mrs. Steadman and I are your very good friends; and whenever the time comes that you choose to confide in us, and ask our advice, you shall have it, with all our hearts. Good-morning.'

So I retreated, more than ever convinced that there was a mystery about our estimable—what do I say?—*inestimable* domestic—but quite contented to wait upon Time, his 'whirligigs and revenges,' for elucidation. When I thought of her quietly dignified manner, her pleasant though rare smile, her conscientious care and steady industry, I longed to unravel the stupendous puzzle. When I thought of the delightful breakfasts and lovely dinners I daily revelled in, I was more than ever confirmed in my prudential resolution to leave well alone.

As I was going to say before, Mrs. Steadman by degrees, and having got over the feeling that it was not the thing to enjoy the society of your domestic, charm she never so wisely, began to form a strong attachment to the self-contained, reserved girl, who so effectively and unostentatiously performed what she had always found to be very distasteful work. After a certain hour of the day, as I have said, all the uncomfortable part of the work was over, even that part being dignified and reduced to

its lowest limits of exertion, by the methodical arrangement and delicate cleanliness with which the operation was performed. Mary had made a request, after the first few days, to be allowed to sit with the nurse, who was an old family servant. With her and the children, joined by my wife, the afternoon passed cheerfully in the everlasting, never-palling pleasures of the needle—that virtuous substitute for I know not how many recreations indulged in by impatient mankind.

Gradually, as Mary Dale saw that her secret was respected, and her decision to take an unusual step unquestioned, she became less timid, and permitted herself to relapse into her natural manner. She showed, in an unaffected way, considerable knowledge of the great world, that is, the world of metropolitan fashion. She was accomplished, though she firmly objected to exhibit her proficiency in any way, lest gossip might be aroused, and she went through the contents of our modest library at a pace which showed that she had been an eager and by no means superficial student.

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Letter from Miss Seyton to Miss Charteris

BUNDABURRAMAH, 12*th June* 187–.

DARLING KATIE—You see that I was safely deposited at the place in the desert with the unpronounceable name, as you used to call it. I carried out my purpose in spite of friends, relations, and a contemptibly undecided heart, which nearly betrayed me at the last moment, when I parted from dear old nurse at the train.

You know very well my reason for taking the step which I did. You were among my principal dissuaders and scolders about the naughty, wicked, quixotic, unconventional plan which I had formed. I suppose you, none of you, knew how near I was to bursting out crying and abandoning the whole grand project. I should have been very sorry afterwards, for now that I have got over the difficulty, I am well pleased with myself and everybody else. I always said there was nothing like perseverance. Nor is there. Only there comes a time when the most beautiful cut-and-dried arrangement looks full of flaws and mistakes ; and then firmness (which men call obstinacy where girls are concerned) comes in. You always accused me of having too much of that useful quality. I assure you every grain of it was wanted when the train moved off, and I found myself alone, under the protection of a total stranger, and in what my conscience occasionally assured me was a false position.

However, mamma had made all kinds of inquiries about Mr. Steadman, my employer, and hearing nothing but good about him and his wife, she finally permitted me to make the engagement. Well, away we went. Luckily, Mr. Steadman was considerate or careful enough of that rare domestic, a decent cook (this I afterwards suspected to be the true reading), to take a first-class ticket for me. So I had no troubles to start with ; and when we had to change for a coach, at midnight, he took much the same care of the 'young lady,' as all girls, gentle or simple, are called indifferently when travelling, as if I had been a 'real lady.' Do you think I am growing

just a little vulgar? Mind you tell me—the very first faint symptom—there's a dear. Well, I enjoyed the journey so much.

I am pretty strong (you know cooks couldn't be delicate), and don't get headaches. The lovely fresh air, so different from a wretched street. The glorious dawn; the sun heaving up a great golden shell above the purple-crowned brows of the calm mountains. Oh! I could have screamed with delight. But I looked as prim as prim, I declare to you. I couldn't tell for certain whether Mr. Steadman suspected my masquerade or not. He is one of those men who think a great deal, see everything, and don't get surprised out of their opinions. On second thoughts, I think it's probable he *did* guess something, though I was most careful in my get-up; so plain, though rather neat, and perhaps the least thing incongruous as to cuffs. But he had reasons of his own for taking no notice, so he was as gravely kind as if I had been old nurse herself—bless her old heart! Goodness gracious, what a dreadfully long letter! My candle is just going out, and I shan't get another till to-morrow, so I must rush to the conclusion, which is, that Mrs. Steadman is a kind little woman and a lady—that we get on very well, and that I am in capital health and spirits and have such a colour, tell Roland—or rather don't tell him, poor fellow. He must wait a little like me. Dearest, best, and carefullest of Katies, good-bye.—Your own eccentric friend, MARY DALE SEYTON.

Letter from Miss Charteris to Miss Mary Dale

WOOLLAHRA, 20*th June* 187–.

Oh! my own loved and lost friend (to sight, I mean, to memory dear), you wicked runaway, pirate of the dark blue sea, no, I don't mean that exactly; as you have gone up the country, you must resemble a bushranger more when he or she—oh dear! what has become of my verb? I must begin again. I was charmed to get your good-for-nothing letter, though I never will forgive you, Miss, and I hope your hands will get ruined, and that you will die of freckles, for I was just beginning to get low-spirited about you, and pictured you slaving away in some dismal hole in the bush, surrounded by rough people, and without the power of getting back. And I knew you would never, *never* give in, you obstinate puss! However, I am so glad to hear that you have fallen on your feet, after casting yourself violently down the social ladder, which is more than you deserve. No! I won't scold you again—I promise you, dear-loved and lost gazelle. Really though, I don't think you ought to be encouraged, though, from your description, a girl might be worse off than doing real, and not make-believe, work in a nice, neat, cool kitchen, all by one's self, and sewing peacefully in the afternoons with a nice nurse or a cheery good little woman, as you describe your mistress (much laughter—as they say in the papers). I believe Fanny Westfield, who teaches, says she is worried and worked to death, and has dreadful headaches, and is as thin as she can be, while you seem to be enjoying your duties and getting quite a colour,

which is all, Reggy Dalton used to say, was needed to make you perfectly lovely. Isn't there some 'grand dame' that has all ladies for servants? I don't know whether I should care for that kind of thing. I'm afraid I should squabble dreadfully with my fellow 'helps.' Now, you are safe from such a state of things. How dignified you must look! I can scarcely help screaming when I think of (possibly) Mrs. Steadman's little girl saying, 'Mary, ma says do make haste with the dinner'; or, 'Ma says the beef's underdone, and you're to put it into the oven again.'

I went to a ball last week and had an ecstatic galop with Claud Slidlesley. He saw Roland in the bush somewhere, and said he was working so hard, and looking grave and miserable. You might write him one wee letter. There's the dinner-bell. Beg your pardon—dearest Molly—oh, there I am again. Good-bye, my darling old girl; take care of your dear self, and oh, be careful of your hands! Of course you wear gloves always—that is, nearly always. He used to admire a 'refined expression of hand' as he said to me once. Oh! that dreadful dinner-bell! Now, I hate dinners; I wish we could do without them, and those worrying—ah! what was I going to say?—Your loving, blundering, dearest of all old friends, KATE CHARTERIS.

CHAPTER III

THE current of our family life, once all whirlpools, cascades, what not, from the turbulence or treachery of female domestics, flowed on now so peacefully that we were in danger, like other prosperous persons, of having no history worth the writing. What with her talent with the needle, her loving sympathy with our children, her unobtrusive attention to my taste in culinary composition, Mary Dale was rapidly becoming dangerously indispensable, and as the year turned I found myself pensively wondering what we should all do when the busy shearing was over, and the bush-fires, hot winds, and anxious festivities of Christmas were upon us. What should we do? Sit down and weep when the mail bore away our peerless Mary—our companion, comforter, and cook? Delightful word! New honours clothed it, enriched by the tender association of Mary's calm, sweet, gravely cheerful features. She had lost much of her armour now, and made confidences of the most thrilling nature to my wife, which were unhandsomely concealed from me.

When I say that perpetual serenity reigned, perhaps I may be permitted to retract that too unconditional statement. A month or two after I

returned from the metropolis, a short, but sharp and decisive conflict took place between the two high contracting parties. What were the mental ingredients which precipitated so frightful a result?

I believe the proximate cause of the aggressive demeanour of the ordinarily mild and tender mistress, and the untranslatable haughty attitude of the maid was, like the North Pole, never actually discovered, perhaps, like it, never will be. My readers will recall the statement—*souvent femme varie*. No other explanation can I offer. Whether my wife was 'put out,' whether the wind was in the east or in some occult quarter, whereof ordinary males deem not, whether a sudden lack of sympathy with the maid's extra-domestic graces had transformed them into 'airs and graces,' I know not. But the facts simply were, that when I returned at eve, as is my custom, decently tired, hungry, and perhaps a little—but no! say with just sufficient nervous quiescence to last me till dinner-time, I was received with a thrilling embrace from my overwrought partner, and this plaintive announcement, 'Oh—Edward! Mary has behaved with want of proper respect to me, and she says she must go at the end of the month.'

Here the little woman looked doubtfully at me, and sobbed unrestrainedly.

I am afraid I disengaged her from my embrace a second or two before the regulation period, and looking at her (*she* says) very sternly, thus spoke—'Of course you could not possibly contrive to exist without a quarrel. Women certainly have no more brains than flies; no more self-control than children! An overseer has sense enough not to quarrel with

his men just before shearing; even a commercial traveller knows enough not to flog his horses in the middle of a plain; a captain isn't hard upon his crew with the breakers in sight—but, hang me! if a woman isn't capable of *doing anything* on the impulse of the moment, no matter what ruin is imminent.'

'Oh, Edward, Edward, don't speak and look so dreadfully. But you always take part with this—this Mary Dale. You don't think it possible I can be in the right.'

'Well, well,' I said gloomily, 'let us look forward to another year of misery. Tell me how it happened.'

'Well,' said the little woman plaintively, 'now I come to look back upon it, it all seems to have sprung out of nothing. I wished to have a particular dish to-day for dinner, and Mary reminded me that I myself had arranged the menus for the week on Monday. She pointed out that it would lead to an alteration of the whole dinner, as she had used some of the materials for another dish. I am afraid *now*,' confessed my ordinarily meek-voiced dove, 'that I was silly enough to think there was a tone of calm superiority in her voice. I hadn't felt quite well all the morning, and I told her hastily that I believed I was mistress in my own house, and that I did not intend to be ruled by *any servant*. I knew it was cruel, mean, if you will, to say so, but it came out in a moment, and I felt as if I could have given anything to recall it.'

'And what did she say to this polished little stiletto stab?'

'Oh, Edward, I know you won't forgive me, and it will serve me right if I have to work my fingers to the bone. Well, she looked at me for an instant with an expression of great surprise, then her face

flushed, and her eyes half filled with tears. She turned away for a moment, and then said in a very cold haughty tone:

'"Mrs. Steadman, I had hoped when I first saw you that I should have met with the consideration yielded by a lady to—every one. I find I was mistaken. I must decline to remain longer in your service." Her tone, more than the words, irritated me; so I said she might go whenever she pleased, and that I was sorry to find I was mistaken in *her*. She made no reply. Bowing gravely, but still haughtily, she went into her bedroom, leaving me oh, so dreadfully sorry and ashamed of myself!'

'Well,' said I thoughtfully, 'perhaps after all it is better for one's wife to cook and drudge generally. It rubs off the poetry of married life, and so saves both from the jars and aches of over-sensitiveness. Then, of course, *she* can't give warning, and you are relieved from all anxiety. In the state of muddle to which the household is henceforth doomed, you cease to require anything.'

'Oh, Edward,' shrieked my repentant wife, throwing herself upon her knees, 'don't talk in that horrid, cold-blooded manner. I'd far rather you would scold me well.'

'My poor darling,' said I, passing my hand over her bright, soft hair, as the dinner-bell rang; 'why should I scold you for immolating yourself? Upon *you* directly will fall the burden of the consequences of this step; I only suffer indirectly, and besides,' continued I, with studied malice, 'I may be a good deal *away from home*.'

. . . . . .

The dinner was faultless as usual; the fatal dish upon which war had been declared was there. It went out untouched. My usual appetite had abandoned me; it was like a meal before an execution. All was perfect as heretofore, but the hideous future unmanned me. I was gloomy and distrait.

Next morning at breakfast, while sorrowfully surveying the broiled kidneys, as who should say, 'grief a fixed star and joy a vane that veers,' 'we all do fade as a leaf,' 'nothing is certain but misery,' and so on, till the string of depressing statements founded upon the general frowardness of existence must have been nearly finished—to me entered my wife, but of a radiant and undimmed countenance. 'What has happened, O herald of good tidings?' asked I, with an inspiration of hope. 'Is it peace?'

'All is forgiven and forgotten,' cried she, almost hysterically. 'I went in before breakfast to apologise for my rudeness, but before I could get a word out she stopped me, saying, "Mrs. Steadman, I don't think I behaved well yesterday. I am sorry for it. Perhaps I felt aggrieved, but I acknowledge to —well—not being nice in my manner. I daresay you were put out about something, and I ought to have been more patient."

'"It is I, Mary, who did not behave as I should have done," I burst out. "And I feel more grieved and ashamed than you."

'"You must not say any more," said she, so nicely and kindly, I could have kissed her. "It's all over now. Cooks have proverbially hot tempers, you know. I daresay you won't turn me away."

'The tears were in both our eyes. Oh, Edward, she's an angel!'

'Fancy two in one house,' said I, as I welcomed my repentant house-angel to my bosom; 'that's why this slight disagreement took place, but if birds in their little nests agree, how much more so, etc. I suppose this will be the last of these terrific combats and heart-shaking uncertainties. Really, my dear, I'm not equal to them now. I am getting old, you know.'

As I think I said before this painful reminiscence, white-robed peace dwelt henceforth under my lowly iron-bark-shingled roof. I was free to devote my unshackled energies to the improvement of my stock, the enlargement of my water privileges, and the reformation of my fortunes. When I returned from my day's work to my home, now the scene and theatre of modest comfort and permissible luxury, I felt daily that I was developing a larger nature, a more highly cultured intelligence.

Yes, I *must* have alluded at an earlier portion of this simple narrative to the approaching departure of our incomparable Mary. Departures are always approaching somehow; those most undesired glide forward like railway trains, with flaming eyes of doom or derision, as the case be. Bills have that peculiarity, perhaps some one may have noticed. Bills payable I mean. Perhaps the best hitherto undiscovered way of getting over an uncomfortable period of time would be to draw a bill maturing at its expiration. If *that* wouldn't spur old Chronos into a slight increase of relative speed, wouldn't tend to a total cessation of ennui, I am unable to offer a more practical suggestion.

Well, I must drag myself and my tale nearer the dreadful day, when,—but oh! I was very nearly forgetting a *most* important episode. Just sit down again, dear reader; it isn't long, and is vitally necessary to the satisfactory—ahem—to the real facts of the case. Half an hour after sundown, one dusty, hot, windy day, up drove old Mr. Ralph Ratcliffe of Ratcliffe Heath, 'down the country,' as the exterior provinces are wont to be described, who had just been 'up the country' visiting some of his dozen or two stations. The old man was not easy to beat, and was popularly supposed to be much harder than nails, or whatever might be the appropriate simile for the endurance of a man who was never tired, or, apparently, hungry, thirsty, or in need of sleep at any hour of the day or night, when there was any work to be done.

However, *nec tendit arcum*, without some slight reactionary symptoms. So, whether it was the slow o'ertaking foot of Time, or whether sixteen hours of fever heat, dust glare, and bush-fires had proved 'trying' (as my wife said) to a frame which had for sixty years experienced a good deal of adverse exercise, certain it is that old Ralph looked just about done as he alighted slowly from his buggy at our gate.

'You don't look well, Mr. Ratcliffe,' said I, as I walked in with him to the house—he had indignantly refused my arm—'let me give you some refreshment before you go to your room.'

'Well? Why shouldn't I be well?' demanded he, as if travelling in a simoom was an exercise of the most invigorating, not to say exhilarating nature.

'There's nothing to hurt a man in driving sixty or seventy miles, is there?'—he had come nearer eighty. 'But *I will* take a glass of brandy-and-water before I pay my respects to Mrs. Steadman. I've had deuced little to eat or drink to-day.'

The restorative, with carefully cooled water, was exhibited, after which the old gentleman was decidedly more reasonable. He reappeared, after a leisurely toilette, much more like a respectable land-owner, and less like a bear, than at first. He permitted himself to be gently entreated by my amiable helpmate, who was of the opinion that the 'good old gentleman was working himself to death,' and that he ought to stay a week at Bundaburramah and rest himself, before he tempted sunstroke, fever, and ague, what not—in fact, all the dangers of the road. But she had not quite sufficient courage to make this proposition to our venerable guest. Fancy old Ralph resting for a week anywhere but in his grave! The very thought would have been enough to send him half way to it. The dinner-bell rang, but our guest declined to go in, saying it would be a mere matter of form, as, from whatever cause, he had not the smallest shred of appetite, and in spite of his long day's fast could not touch a joint to save his life.

'Joint!' said Mrs. Steadman playfully, glancing at the thermometer. 'We don't have joints at this time of the year. You *must* come in, Mr. Ratcliffe, or else I shall stay and keep you company.'

The old boy was too gallant to refuse after this statement, so in we went, and I thought I saw a slight air of astonishment as he took in the general expression of the table. An adaptation of the

dîner à la Russe, at any rate involving flowers in the centre, and the keeping off the table of masses of hot meat and steaming dishes, is to be commended for summer custom.

As it happened, this particular day had been fixed for the rehearsal of a lunch that we were going to give to some friends the following week, and the dauntless Mary had insisted upon having it in duplicate to ensure a perfect success on the day of performance.

I saw no harm in having our wine properly cooled in such hot weather; and after a glass or two of hock, and an introduction to the *entrées*, Mr. Ratcliffe began to look upon the dinner with less indifference.

'Really, Mrs. Steadman,' said he, 'such a dinner as this tempts a man; and I have a higher opinion of cookery, as one of the fine arts, than I ever had before. I have seen nothing but rounds of beef, legs of mutton, and chops half warmed in frying-pans for the last month. I have always been careless about diet; but I must, I really *must* begin to value the proper preparation of food. Only young people, I begin to think, can afford to neglect digestion.'

'I am so glad to hear you say so,' said the flattered hostess; 'but we have not always been able to give our friends such good dinners.'

'I should think not, I should think not,' said the old gentleman, actually making a second request for a 'happy thought' in the shape of an *entremet*. 'But wherever did you get such a cook? Steadman, you luxurious dog, don't be led away by the price of stock; it won't last, my boy, it won't last—trust old

Ralph Ratcliffe, who has seen every rise and fall for the last fifty years. Why, you've brought up an ex-club cook! Must had have done so, eh?'

'Nothing of the sort,' said I; 'haven't quite stock enough to stand that sort of thing.'

'Good woman cook, elderly, but drinks, of course,' said the old gentleman, with bland certainty. 'Have to give her a glass of grog last thing at night to keep down the hankering. Red face—old soldier—that sort of woman—sure as if I had seen her.'

'Wrong again,' said I, 'wonderfully wrong. My dear,' said I—we were at the second bottle of Rudesheimer by this time—'can't we contrive somehow to get Mr. Ratcliffe a sight of Mary?'

'Really, I don't know,' answered my wife, without entering very strongly into my suggestion. 'I daresay, if you wish very much that Mr. Ratcliffe should behold our pretty, as well as very good, cook, it could be managed. I'll ask her to go into the drawing-room for something, and she will have to pass through here, as you chose to build your house without passages, Mr. Steadman.'

'No passage of arms, I hope, will ever be found in this house,' replied I. But she had left us. We did not immediately rise, and at the conclusion of the bottle, in which I was ably assisted by my previously exhausted guest, Mr. Ratcliffe asserted that he had never eaten so good a dinner before—'done me a world of good,' he continued to aver, 'world of good, world of good—in point of fact, saved my life, not a doubt of it, Steadman, old fellow!'

At this juncture Mrs. Steadman informed me that

there was a cup of tea awaiting us in the drawing-room, but that, unluckily, Mary had a very severe headache, and had gone to bed.

Mary was sufficiently recovered to rise early and prepare what was needful for the breakfast; but, unfortunately, her headache recommenced, and so incapacitated her for the slightest exertion that she was compelled to retire again to her room. Mr. Ratcliffe, therefore, after bestowing much praise upon the breakfast, was compelled to depart without seeing her. His last words were:

'My dear Mrs. Steadman, never forget your kindness, never forget your dinner, very sorry I could not tell the cook so; give her my love, as she's a young woman; best dinner I ever tasted. Good-bye.'

'My dear Mr. Ratcliffe,' wheedled the young person who had successfully wheedled *me*, 'just write it upon this card. Mary will be so proud when I show it to her; *do* write it, send your love and all.'

'My dear madam, of course, of course I will,' answered the now renovated senior, with all the ardour of youth, under the influence of my wife's still effective hazel eyes, and drawing forth a stout silver-cased pencil, he scrawled:

'Best dinner I ever ate, best cooked, best served, my love to the cook.—Ralph Ratcliffe.'

The wiry buggy horses declined to stand any longer. Mr. Ratcliffe handed the card to my wife, with a bow like that of a marquis in the days of the Regency, and 'dusted out' at the rate of twelve miles an hour to one of his desirable properties.

'Is the habit of flirting so ingrained in women,' I demanded sternly, 'that even a grandfather is considered better than no one? What audacious correspondence is this that you carry on before the eyes of your trusting husband, madam?'

'Never mind, never mind, my dear!' said this shameless young woman, concealing the document. 'I only told him Mary would be pleased with it, and so she will.'

'I am glad to see that her headache is better,' remarked I, as I beheld the convalescent gazing after the vehicle of Mr. Ratcliffe with an eager abstracted air. 'Has she fallen in love with him, too? Well, there's some comfort in store for a middle-aged man if he can be certain that his power to interest the sex will not practically cease at the age of threescore and ten.'

CHAPTER IV

Letter from Miss Mary Dale Seyton to Miss Kate Charteris

BUNDABURRAMAH, 25*th November* 187–.

MY DEAREST CATHERINE—Oh, my dear, I have just had such a fearfully narrow escape! I was always afraid of being recognised by some old acquaintance, though there could not be a better place than this for being quite out of the world.

Now, who *do* you suppose, of all people under the sun, came here unexpectedly and stayed all night? No one but old Mr. Ratcliffe! Think of that—fortunately I was near the door, and heard his voice, which I should know anywhere, before he came past. I had just time to dash into my bedroom, and as the old gentleman was remarkably tired for *him*—it was the most awful hot-wind day—he went very soon into his room and did not see me. I am not sure, after all, whether his visit may not be productive of good. It seems he thought himself too tired to eat, and there being rather a well-composed little dinner (though I say it—professional vanity being allowed for) he enjoyed it very much, praised the cook, and even had the curiosity

to want to see her. Fancy my feelings! However, of course, I had a headache, and could not be seen either that night or the next morning. The best of the joke is that he sent his love to the cook, and dear little Mrs. Steadman got him to write it on a card—so that I am in possession of his written statement that it was the best-cooked dinner he had ever tasted. Such testimonials are sometimes of value.

My visit to the country draws to a close. My time is nearly up. Really I am less glad than I thought I could be at the prospect of returning. Mr. and Mrs. Steadman have been very kind to me. The climate is fine. I have grown so fond of the children ; and if anything awfully sudden and serious —and—well, impossible, happened between me and Roland, I really believe I could go on contentedly and happily here, year after year. However, I shall not, perhaps, be altogether sorry to feel the fresh, briny blast, and to hug my dearest darling Kate again.—Your ownest and lovingest friend,

M. D. SEYTON.

Miss Charteris to Miss Mary Dale

WOOLLAHRA, 13*th December* 187–.

MY DEAREST MAID (of all work)—No, I suppose you are not so fully occupied. So you are really going to leave that charming retreat Bunda—— and all the rest, and return to your family and friends. I wonder whether we shall ever tread on your toes, mentally, or whether we shall hail in you a princess released from captivity, whose experiences and

adventures will throw us all into the shade. You always had a habit of posing as a leader of your *monde*. Oh, dear, I would have given anything to have come up and seen your respectful demeanour to your mistress!

So you saw old Mr. Ratcliffe, or his back? I can imagine your consternation. And you cooked him an irresistible dinner? Food has played its part in the world's great dramas before now. 'This, by no means to be inwardly despised, art—profession—life-habit of good cookery (some say Gallic-derived), all respect secretly as a minister of enjoyment—nay, an elixir-vitæ.' I have been reading Carlyle, you see. What an old dear he is! When young ladies do not get married at twenty-one, and have no kind destiny to pitchfork them into a 'situation,' they must read a little.

Isn't it a wonderful coincidence; I saw Roland yesterday. He has just come down from some horrid place a thousand miles off, and is burnt black, and has had the ague, and—looks handsomer than ever. He goes back to-morrow.

He says he thinks some one will relent some day. In the meanwhile, though he has fits of despondency, he is fidelity personified.

This I know for a *fact*.

So now, I hope you will sleep well after that and your lawful day's work. Heigho! Do you think Mrs. S. wants a laundress? If you don't come soon, don't be surprised if you see me by the mail some fine day.—Ever (or nearly always) your true but unsettled friend,

CATHERINE CHARTERIS.

From Mr. Roland Ratcliffe to Robert Stanley, Esq., Woods and Wastes Office, Sydney

LOWER BACK DARGIL,
15th December 187–, 4 P.M.

MY DEAR BOB—How I envy you, just taking down your coat from its peg, filling your pipe, and sauntering off for a stroll in the Domain, or an hour's practice in the boat. In either of these occupations you are safe, at this time of year, for a glorious whiff of sea-breeze—maddening thought! Here I am stuck for another month in this howling wilderness, in the society of Blacks, Chinamen, inebriated shearers, and all the demons of this Lower Dargil! Taking the heat, torment, and profanity, it cannot be very far from that other, perhaps lowest abode. What a life it is! I have had ten years of it now, and I abhor it deeply and daily. Work, of course, is work, and as such to be accepted. But it ought to have an end, or hope of end some day. Now this end, hope, or expectation, I do not at present catch a glimpse of. The governor was up here the other day, and said he thought it rather a pleasant place to live in—not by any means hot overmuch. Told me (as usual) how much harder he worked and saved before he permitted himself to think of a wife.

That last thrice-blessed word makes me think of my darling Mary. If she had not more sense than I have, we should have run away and married years ago. She wouldn't hear of it. 'Patience, my dear Roland the brave,' she would say; 'better practise voluntary self-sacrifice now, than compulsory ditto

all our lives after. If we are true to each other, fortune and your stern father will come round some day.' She took it into her head to pay a visit to a country friend last Christmas—*where*, I could never learn, just leaving a line to say she would be back that month next year. It isn't long now, thank God! I shall start for Sydney at the end of this monotonous, murderous month. By George! it's enough to make any fellow drink, or go mad. You know, for I told you, old fellow, how the governor wouldn't hear of our marriage. He had absurd ideas that I never could disabuse him of. 'You shall never marry one of these Seyton girls,' he said, over and over again; 'that is—not with my consent. They're a proud, useless lot, and they haven't a penny to bless themselves with. I don't believe one of them could do a bit of real work, if she had a house of her own, in the bush, where you'll have to live for the next ten or fifteen years, no! not if she was to die for it. All they think of is dressing, and drawing, playing the piano, and reading useless books from Monday morning to Saturday night. You'll have to travel like a circus, with half a dozen vans to carry the servants and luggage, if you marry a girl out of that house; and you'll not do it—not with my money, at all events.' This was his general argument. In vain I implored him to see that the girls, if well dressed and well educated, were economical. That cultivated minds did not necessitate indolence or extravagance. No, of course he wouldn't hear reason, old men never do. Why, I wonder? Don't they gather wisdom? It appears not. Well, I told Mary all this. She

smiled when I came to the work part, then paused and thought for a while, as she often does. By George! here's the mail-boy's horse has bucked and thrown him. He has to go sixty miles with this letter. I must stop for the present, and help catch him, and pick up the mail.—In haste, your unlucky friend, ROLAND RATCLIFFE.

From Robert Stanley, Esq., to Roland Ratcliffe

WOODS AND WASTES OFFICE,
SYDNEY, *7th January* 187–.

MY DEAR ROWLEY—The frog who would a-wooing go fell into misadventure, so you have a precedent from earliest lyric history. Being in love, and, not as yet in possession of the angel referred to in your short note of the 15th ult., of course you are miserable,—to suppose otherwise would be an insult to her charms and your passion. Still, all is not lost. It appears to my calmer intelligence that your Mary has shown the possession of qualities which will add to your happiness, when all this heart and dart business is over. Excuse my plainness. She is prudent, and counsels you to patience and self-denial. You have nowhere accused her of being cold. Women seldom are, so they tell me; therefore, she is coercing her own inclinations, and urging you to do likewise, for your mutual advantage. That shows enlightened foresight, not a common quality of the sex, as I gather from authorities. Being a bachelor, I speak with diffidence. Of the young lady's personal graces and accomplishments, I can depose with certainty, from actual observation. It

appears to me, putting two and two together, as we officials are wont to do in our despatches, that you are a most fortunate fellow. I advise you to abide for the present by her decision, particularly as you deplore, from experience, your power to alter it. I am not sure whether this will find you still at Lower Dargil. Farewell. I go to play a game at billiards. Excuse my lack of pity. The temporary inconveniences of dusty Dargil are cheaply purchased by the potentiality of unlimited travel and independence, when you come into your kingdom. To that end follow the wise counsels of a certain ladye fayre. Bye-bye. If you feel very hot, think of the grateful ices of town ; they are very soothing this year.—Yours as of old, ROBERT STANLEY.

The year 187– belonged to those fortunate seasons which occasionally compensate the toils and anxieties of *habitans in sicco* and his sun-scorched brethren. Wool was very fair ; stock were at once plentiful, in good condition, and high in price. I hardened my heart as the days grew more fiercely hot, while the dust-storms swept through the naked stems of the eucalypti, wailing a requiem to the dying grasses and fading streams. However, dead grass in Australia is good to eat, and fattening withal. And if the creeks cease to run, the water-holes, when permanent, answer much the same purpose. So, except for poetical reasons, there was not much the matter with the season.

'Little woman,' said I to my wife, 'don't you think a trip to Sydney, combined with sea-air, would do you and the children good, this hot weather?'

'Edward!' shrieked the delighted housewife, who had been patiently, but somewhat sorrowfully, looking forward to three months of heat, dust, flies, and lassitude. 'You don't mean it, surely? Oh—you dear—good——!'

'You know, dearest,' said I, resuming the conversation which had been temporarily interrupted. 'I am always willing to give you any reasonable enjoyment, when I have the money to spare. I have often, much against the grain, been compelled to deny you indulgences; now, the same cause no longer operates.'

'You are always my dear, good, thoughtful Edward,' said she, forgetting apparently the trifling differences of opinion which we had had upon this sore point of allowable entertainments. 'Then we can take Mary down, too, as her year is just up. Yes? Oh, I must go and tell her!'

It is hard for the dwellers in cities to realise the deep joy, the childlike eagerness with which the 'route' is greeted by a squatter's family in the far interior after a lengthened absence from town. Not altogether comfortless may be the nest to which the sanguine dweller in the woods has borne the bride, who has given up cheerfully, for love of him, friends, home, all that went to make the cherished portions of life up to that hour. There are the household duties; there is the garden; there may be the blessed, purifying companionship of children to fill up the long hours; but there is little society, there is no recreation; and, more particularly, perhaps, in the cloudless summer days, the most tender, the most domesticated wife may well feel an oppressive mono-

tony — a pining, craving sensation — when the thought of change, society, all the charms of highly-organised social life, flits across her musings. Such was our present mental condition. My wife lay awake half the night thinking of possible delights, like a schoolgirl before the holidays. The children dreamed of countless toys and castles by the sea, with delicious bare-legged paddlings therein. Mary was unusually demonstrative, and sincerely gratified at the idea of going home under my wife's chaperonage. While I—as I looked over the bolts of the waggonette, and scrutinised the condition of my buggy horses, fat and frolicsome, but hard as nails, upon the faultless pasturing of midsummer—thought that iced claret and the club smoking-room would not be a bad exchange for the 'after-shearing' existence of Bundaburramah.

We reached town with not more than the ordinary number of slight accidents and narrow escapes; and oh, that first week of change of air, change of scene, change of diet, change of friends, change of books, change of dress! It was a daily ecstasy. It was a week carved out and forwarded fresh from fairyland. Why do these first weeks refuse to repeat themselves? Why does the bloom cease to remain on the rose? Why halt not the coursers of Phœbus when first their eyes shine through the tender dawn and their manes are damp with dew from the lawns of paradise? Why fade the dreams of love? Why presses forward glorious, bright-haired, bounding youth, himself returning not, though we call to him, weeping bitter tears, and scorning the joyless life that alone remains?

We established ourselves in a pretty furnished cottage, overlooking one of those terraced garden lawns, heavy with flowers, shrubs, and lustrous trailers, through thickets of which you saw the blue, untroubled deep, or watched the free breeze summon the white-fringed billowy ranks. I used to lounge in the cool stone-paved verandah for hours in the calm evenings and starry nights, smoking, dreaming, while the rhythmical plash of the waves on the beach soothed my spirit and well-nigh extinguished all consciousness of the outer world, so largely compounded of toil and strife.

I hope it is superfluous to explain that our first duty, duly performed by my wife, was to deliver over our Mary—no longer so, but Miss Seyton—to her mother and sisters. With the help of a mysterious package, which had arrived by coach about a month before our departure, she appeared 'disguised as a lady'; and to guess from the flattering comments of her delighted family, by no means the worse—on the contrary, conspicuously the better—in health, figure, and complexion, for her mysterious visit to the bush.

'I can never be sufficiently grateful, my dear madam,' said Mrs. Seyton, a high-bred-looking old lady of majestic mien, 'for your goodness and for your motherly care of my daughter. She certainly had my consent, but it was given unwillingly. Words cannot tell my thankfulness to see her back safe and well.'

Here the tears would come into the old lady's eyes.

CHAPTER V

'*We* never can be sufficiently grateful, I assure you,' said my wife, in her pretty way (and between ourselves, when the little woman likes, she has a manner quite irresistible). 'We had quite a "year of consolation," as Fanny Kemble says, while your dear Mary was with us, and I don't look upon it as a year altogether thrown away. We shall see.'

'Mary is the most obstinate girl in the whole world,' said Brenda Seyton, a mischievous-looking younger sister; 'but then she has such a way of making you believe that everything she does is wise and expedient. Usen't she to over-persuade you, Mrs. Steadman? and didn't you have any fights?'

'Your sister Mary will always be the dearest friend I have in the world,' said the small diplomatist, with great dignity. 'I could never be brought to believe that anything she did was not the very best thing—done with the very best intentions.'

'It's the old story, I see,' smiled Miss Brenda. 'You're one of the victims, Mrs. Steadman. It's a pity that one old gentleman should be the only one in the world who can't see what a dear, unselfish thing she is, far too good for Roland or any other man, I believe.'

'We must trust that time may make a little improvement even in this unpromising matter, Miss Brenda,' said my wife, smiling and preparing to depart. 'You are all coming to our picnic, you know, next Saturday?'

We had, upon the time-honoured principle of 'in for a penny in for a pound,' resolved to give a picnic. We were fairly intoxicated with the odour of the briny main, and under that glamour bethought ourselves of the luxury of spending a whole breezy, bright day fishing, oystering, scrambling, and otherwise diverting ourselves and such of our friends as we could entice. Then the sail home under the starlit heavens, over the moon-silvered rippling wave!

'I had no idea I *could* feel so young again,' said my wife, as we added up the probable joys of the day.

'Nor I either,' acquiesced the sympathising head of the house. 'Mind you get plenty of nice girls.'

My wife was fully of opinion that much of the success of such a party depended upon the lunch.

'You be sure to have lots of ice, Edward, and let there be no mistake about the hock and Moselle (I piqued myself upon my acquaintance with these vintages), and I'll show you such a luncheon as Sydney hasn't seen for many a day!'

'But how will you manage that without a Mary Dale?' asked I, with a half-perceptible tribute to memory and regret. 'She doesn't go out to little affairs professionally now, I suppose?'

'Miss Seyton is coming to me to-morrow, and is going with us. Perhaps we may both look into the kitchen the day before.'

'Beware,' said I, 'or you will make some tremendous disclosures, the consequences of which will be on your own small head.'

'*Some* women can keep secrets, sir, though I know you despise us and our wisdom. By the bye, if you see Roland Ratcliffe at the club, or anywhere, mind you ask him.'

'He has not come down the country yet, nor the old buffer either; they are expected daily.'

'Well, ask them both if you see them, Edward. Do you know, I love old Mr. Ratcliffe; he puts me in mind of Front-de-Bœuf or some of Sir Walter's delightful creatures.'

'H'm!' responded I. 'Perhaps there is a slight resemblance. The Jews have the best of it, though, in these latter days, now that we cherish a weak aversion to bloodshed. Still, I think old Ralph could hold his own with any Jew that ever drew cheque.'

. . . . . .

The day arrived. Golden-clear were the waters, soft the breeze, azure-bright the skies, as our boats, with their merry crew of care-defying men and sportive maidens, slipped down the Bay of all Bays. By a curious chance I happened to meet old Ralph Ratcliffe the very last thing the day before, and, more wonderful to relate, he consented to come.

'I have such pleasant recollections of your last hospitality, my boy,' said he, 'that I feel bound to honour Mrs. Steadman's invitation. Besides, I must be dusty, like the wool-bales, a good inch inside the skin. Roads awful. I daresay a blow in the harbour will do me good.'

So when the desert-worn veteran appeared with

a silk coat and a fly-away blue tie, Mrs. Steadman greeted him with such warmth that you would have thought that he had just made us a present of a station or two. I could not quite understand this excessive appreciation of a very stern old gentleman, but I knew from experience that when the little woman 'put on side' it was for somebody's good, and I 'backed up' by taking the old boy about and introducing him to all the pretty girls I fell across.

Did we have a pleasant day? In the after-time, when occasionally mopes and worries would intrude into ours as into all households, it was only necessary to recall some incident of that peerless frolic to throw every one into high spirits. Such walks, such talks, such scrambles, such flirtations, such careless, innocent, unchecked mirth! It was the childhood of the world come again—a sea-bordered Arcadia, a vision of the golden age, when the happy dwellers in wood or grove, by vale and mount, wandered and joyed, wooed and feasted, fearless of sorrow, untempted by gold.

The lunch had been arranged under a gigantic wild fig-tree. We were sheltered from the mid-day sun by a channelled and beetling crag. The thick green couch-grass made a perfect table, upon which our damask was spread.

'What pretty girl is that?' said old Ralph, who was in great spirits. 'What a figure she has; don't see such a complexion about Sydney. Comes from the country, I could swear.'

I immediately introduced him to Miss Mary Dale, partly from a spirit of mischief, and partly because I knew he had a prejudice against the Seyton family,

none of whom he had ever seen. He devoted himself to her with old-fashioned gallantry, and Mary, bewitchingly attired, and having caught the spirit of the hour, replied to his cheerful statements with so much spirit and readiness that the old gentleman told me in confidence, just as we sat down to lunch, that she was the nicest girl he had met for years. 'Something like a girl, not one of those wasp-waisted dawdles that were fit for nothing but to read novels, loll in carriages, and send their husbands at full speed along the road to the Insolvent Court.'

My wife's eyes sparkled as she saw Mr. Ratcliffe lead in Mary, and she motioned them to sit next to her, saying she could not manage without his assistance in carving. Lunch lasted a long time. Those who were qualified to appreciate artistic performances soon discovered that the first and second courses contained culinary treasures not generally granted to so informal a banquet. Among the explorers fresh from recent journeying was Mr. Ratcliffe, who apologised more than once for the positively surprising appetite which he developed.

'Haven't done so well since that wonderful dinner of yours at Bundaburramah, Mrs. Steadman, which I remember with gratitude—shall always remember. I was really tired that day. Dinner brought me to, Miss Dale. Quite wonderful effect. May I ask for some salmi of wild duck? Why, bless my soul!'

This exclamation was elicited from the ancient capitalist after the second mouthful of this meritorious composition, after partaking of which he had put down his fork and gazed wildly around.

'What's the matter?' said I. 'Too much pepper?'

'Pepper be ——— ! Beg your pardon, Mrs. Steadman, but this delightful dish reminds me of the identical one at your great dinner. Must have been prepared by the same hand. That astonishing cook of yours, whoever she was—didn't see her next morning—the same hand must have prepared both.'

'Well, it's a little secret between you and me, Mr. Ratcliffe,' said my wife. 'And I'll promise to tell you if you'll escort me down to the boat after lunch. Mary here knows it—you needn't blush, my dear; and if you'll just restrain your curiosity till we're thinking of the homeward voyage, you shall know all.'

'Certainly, my dear madam, certainly,' quoth the gallant old gentleman. 'I say, Steadman, it won't do to stow away a bottle of hock here, each, if we are to have a life on the ocean wave afterwards. Must take care of the ladies, you know, eh?'

The sun was low, the long glorious day was done, as Mr. Ratcliffe, according to promise, rejoined Mrs. Steadman and Mary, who had prudently been superintending the final basketing of the glass, china, etc., the permanent absence of which would have communicated an unpleasant after-taste to our enjoyment. I took Mary with easy promptness, leaving the aged Ralph to the wiles of the temptress, in the shape of my wife.

'Now, Mrs. Steadman,' I heard him say, 'you promised to let me into the secret of this wonderful cookery. Do you do it yourself? or do you carry about a familiar spirit in a tin box, who turns out lunches and dinners at a moment's notice?'

'The same young woman cooked the salmi at

Bundaburramah and the one you were pleased to recognise to-day; and more than that, our cook of Bundaburramah was at the picnic to-day.'

'I suppose the hot weather has not turned my brain?' said old Ralph thoughtfully, feeling his cranium with a distrustful air. 'I have seen nothing to-day but lovely faces, becoming dresses, young ladies, middle-aged ladies, fine ladies. Now, could any one I have met here to-day have been your cook?'

'Mary, my dear,' said my wife, with a quick but slightly tremulous tone, 'will you please to hand to Mr. Ratcliffe the note which I gave you this morning?'

Mary stopped, and, producing the document in question, advanced shyly towards the old gentleman.

'My dearest Miss Dale,' he said, 'are you in this conspiracy? I feel deeply interested. Are you sure you were not the cook yourself? You will excuse me for opening this mysterious billet?'

'*I was the cook*,' said Mary, holding up her head, with all the hauteur which had never deserted her even in the unromantic kitchen of our bush home.

'What's this?' gasped Mr. Ratcliffe. 'Best dinner, etc. etc., best cooked—best cooked. Love to the cook.—Ralph Ratcliffe. My writing—my signature. I remember—I remember; now I see it all. You were staying with my charming friend Mrs. Steadman, and as they were short of a servant, you went into the kitchen and cooked the dinner. Well, never be ashamed of it, my dear; any young lady who had cooked such a dinner as that, could make two such salmis, ought to be proud of it to the day of

her death. If my son had only the sense to choose a girl like you, my dear.'

'Don't praise me before you know all,' said she. 'I don't want your approbation under false colours. I was, for a full year, the cook at Bundaburramah. I am Mary Dale Seyton.'

'Seyton, Miss Seyton!' said the old man, changing his tone wholly, and looking steadily at her, at me, and at my wife. 'So that is the key to the whole cipher. And how did you come to be a year at Bundaburramah as cook?'

'Because I knew that you had said that neither I nor my sisters had capacity for sensible work; and I was determined to show you,' said our Mary, standing up and looking him fearlessly in the face with her honest eyes, 'that I *could* work, and that we were not the useless, frivolous girls you chose, without knowing us, to take it for granted we were.'

'And I can depose and testify on oath, if required by my Queen and country,' said I, striking up at this somewhat embarrassing juncture, 'that such a cook we never had before, and never shall have again. If anything happens to my wife here, I am ready to——'

'Not if I know it,' interposed our elderly friend, with considerable briskness. 'This young lady has contracted a written engagement, or I am misinformed. Mrs. Steadman, I shall indict you for a conspiracy for the purpose of providing one Ralph Ratcliffe with the best daughter-in-law in the whole world. And my dear Miss Seyton, accept the very humble apologies of a conceited old idiot, who thought he could choose a wife for another man.'

We separated into different groups and parties

after disembarking, and Mr. Ratcliffe insisted upon escorting Miss Seyton as far as my house. When we arrived there it was comparatively early in the evening, though quite time for all picnic parties to be concluded. In the moonlight I observed a tall figure leaning in statuesque pose against one of the verandah posts.

'Not unlike Master Roland,' observed old Ralph, whose eyesight was by no means dimmed, nor his bodily strength abated. 'I expected him down to-night.'

It was indeed that ill-used personage. After a long day's journey he had arrived at Mrs. Seyton's house, only to find that his idol had gone forth on seafaring pleasure bent. Then, having discovered my abode, he had kept vigil since sundown, wearily awaiting our somewhat leisurely return. Virtue, however, was close to the proverbial reward. As we came up, full of spirits, and somewhat in contrast to his subdued air, his father was the first to speak.

'Roland, my boy, there's been a trifling mistake rectified to-day, principally by the good sense and high feeling of Miss Seyton here—a young lady, sir, whom I shall be only too proud to welcome to our family.'

Here Roland was suddenly transformed into another and wholly different individual. Shaking his father's hand warmly, he all but embraced my wife, in his indiscriminating fervour.

'Don't you speak to Miss Seyton yet,' said old Ralph, retaining his grasp of that maiden. 'You're not half worthy of her, sir. Do you think I'd have been bullied out of a girl like her by all the fathers

in the world? No, sir! At your age I should have run away with her—if I had had the distinguished honour to have gained her affections. And snapped my fingers at my old governor; and he wasn't a man to be played with, either.'

'It wasn't my fault, dad,' quoth Master Roland, with cheerful defiance; 'don't make any mistake there. *I had* arranged when to go, and what to do, in case you—well—cut up rough. But she stood firm, though we nearly quarrelled about it. Would not hear of anything but time and patience. I'm afraid she's pretty obstinate. But you seem to know each other pretty well by this time, if I'm to judge by appearances.'

'You're a lucky dog, sir, a lucky dog,' chuckled old Ralph. 'Here, take the greatest care of her,' and he handed the somewhat discomposed young lady over to the enraptured Roland. 'I very much regret, Steadman, that I can't come in, as I have some letters to write at the club. I daresay Miss Seyton will be able to render a full account of all her proceedings. Mrs. Steadman, my warmest thanks for all your kindness, which, as well as this memorable picnic, and *the dinner*, I shall never forget.'

So Ratcliffe senior went off, and Ratcliffe junior came in, and as my wife had necessarily a few household matters to arrange, and I thought a smoke on the balcony would be a pleasant finale to the day's exertions, the lovers had a good hour to compare notes and otherwise clear up mysterious doubts.

We were all very merry in the drawing-room before we turned Roland out, and when, on the following morning, I delivered Mary to her friends, I

found Roland seated there, the centre of an admiring group of probable sisters-in-law.

The sequel was not long delayed. Old Ralph, who generally did a thing well, when he decided to do it at all, gave the young couple a magnificent wedding, and was truly liberal in his after arrangements for their welfare.

'Whatever doubts I may have had about Roland,' the old man said, 'are now at rest—with such a wife he can't go wrong.'

We saw our Mary decked in the 'sweetest' possible inspiration of the artiste of the day, presumably equal to 'all that Worth could offer.' We wended our way home to Bundaburramah in due time, having secured reasonable, if not transcendental, domestics. But whenever we visit the metropolis, upon our annual trip to the seaside, we generally fall across that happy and prosperous couple, Mr. and Mrs. Roland Ratcliffe, and never fail to extract some fun from the still pleasant remembrance of 'our new cook.'

ANGELS UNAWARES

ANGELS UNAWARES

THERE was more than the usual mild excitement in the quiet country town of Barradoo, when it became known that a couple of travelling Englishmen had taken up their quarters at the Woolpack Hotel, with the intention of remaining in the neighbourhood. Further particulars, obtained from Joe Drummond, bank clerk in the National, who lodged there, amounted to this:—'The strangers were young,' he should say, 'not bad-looking, very swell in their ways, and stand-offish in manner.' Thus the young gentleman expressed it. 'One of them—Grandison,' he thought was his name, 'talked about wanting to see station life. The "Captain," so the other chap called him, was a smart-looking card. They played billiards A1. Seemed to have money too, else old Bowstead would never turn the house upside down for them as he did. Always went about together. The Captain did most of the talking. The tall man took it out mostly in smoking.'

Such a conjectural basis was hardly equal to a letter of introduction from a friend or of credit from a financier, in the case of two utterly unknown persons. Still, in the country, agreeable strangers are scarce. Visitors of mark are always at a

premium, and though Englishmen are wrong in thinking that people may do all sorts of unconventional things in Australian society, the canons of hospitality are construed leniently.

It was decided, therefore, in conclave or otherwise, that the strangers were to be called upon and invited out by the *élite* of Barradoo.

No time was lost. The police magistrate, and the bankers, the two doctors, the three lawyers, the clergyman, the civil engineer, a retired military officer—most of them family men—called formally, and gave general or special invitations. Besides all these social minnows, the Triton of the vicinity, the mammoth squatter, whose vast freeholds elbowed the little town on all sides, even *he* presented himself.

Mr. Blocksleigh happened to be at home, for a wonder, spending the winter in his ancestral halls, as Mrs. Butters, the overseer's wife, had been heard to call them. Being a trifle hard up for decent society, as he expressed it, the Barradoo people not being quite up to the mark in his opinion, soon after hearing this last intelligence, he ordered out the mail-phaeton, and rattled up to the door of the Woolpack, where he was received by Bowstead, and ushered into the presence of the illustrious strangers with all befitting reverence. They were at that moment in the billiard room.

'So glad to make their acquaintance; knew they must find it fearfully dull in Barradoo. Hardly a soul to speak to, of course. Since Lord Eustace and the Hon. Mr. Wander had left, Blocksleigh Hall had been infernally dull. Daily fit of the blues, give

them his honour! Must take pity on him! Come next week and stay a month. Weather glorious just now.'

'Would be most happy,' made answer the Captain. 'Had a few engagements just now, but in about a week—say ten days—delighted to pay him a visit. His friend Grandstone wished, above all things, to see the life of the Australian bush.'

The gentleman alluded to, who had left off staring absently at Mr. Blocksleigh and was knocking about the billiard balls, turned round and murmured, 'Bush life—delighted—thing I came out on purpose to go in for.'

'As to that,' said the squatter, 'I'm not sure I can promise you much just now. Blocksleigh Hall is not exactly a—a station—not in the back-block line, you know. We don't call this "the bush," you know.'

'The da-vil!' exclaimed the tall Englishman, facing round and gazing through the window, from which, if the truth be told, some hundreds of miles of the unpicturesque ring-barked woodlands of the Lower Wammera were apparently visible. 'Then what the dooce *do* you call it?'

'We call it the country,' said Mr. Blocksleigh majestically. 'But,' and here he relapsed into his cheery society manner, which he reserved for the distinguished persons who occasionally quitted the Union Club to relax amid the fresh air and unstinted hospitality of Blocksleigh Hall, 'you come over and I'll put you up to that, and a few other Australian wrinkles.'

'Haw!' commenced Mr. Grandstone, when the

Captain, with a marked air of decision, interrupted—

'You will see us to-morrow week. Thanks very much. Bowstead will send us over, and we shall be most willing to be your guests for a fortnight.'

On the appointed day, Mr. Bowstead, in person, had the gratification of driving his distinguished guests to the Hall, an experience to which he duly referred with honest pride before and after the event.

But, previous to this auspicious occurrence, their *entrée* to the best Barradoo society had been frankly availed of by the strangers. They had been dined by the police magistrate, and entertained at a 'small and early,' 'not quite a dance, you know—just a social evening,' at the house of the 'National' banker, who had three daughters. The lawyers had done their part: Mr. Rondell, a portly, loud-voiced *bon vivant*, with a small, quiet wife and two cheerful daughters; Mr. Ventnor, an elderly, slightly acidulated bachelor, famous for his whist parties, port wine, and conservative opinions. With the fewest exceptions, the stranger guests were the admired of all beholders — the general theme and topic of approving converse. 'They were so good-looking, they dressed so well.' 'Their manners were so simple and unaffected.' 'Good form'; this from the men. 'So unlike anything you see out here. There's a stamp upon them which you can't mistake'; this from the young ladies. The only dissenting voices from the chorus of admiration which swelled and rippled around the objects of all this hero-worship, were Mrs. Towers of Sandy Creek, the mother of Charlie

Towers, who had been previously held to be the favoured admirer of Miss Kate Bellenden; and old Miss M'Causland, a maiden lady of Scotch extraction, whose acute perceptions had probably not been dulled by much flattering attention.

'Dashed if I can see what there is to make such a howling about in these two English fellows,' said Charlie Towers to his chief chum and crony, Jack Ainslie, as they were starting for a day's fishing one Saturday morning; 'I don't say that the Captain, as they call him, isn't well up in things generally. I've nothing to say against him. The long chap is a fine upstanding fellow; he can play billiards and shoot no end. Very neat with the gloves, too, for all his haw-haw ways. But there are plenty of as good all-round men out here. Not over clever about books either, or says he isn't. One would think the women here had never seen a man before. Besides I can't get it out of my head that there's something crooked about them. Not above-board, I mean.'

'Letters of credit wrong,' laughed his friend. 'Big swindle. Miranda business, eh? We're a little hipped, Charlie, my boy.'

'Not at all—nothing of that kind. Besides, Carton of the 'Asia had a private line. He'll back them to any extent. No; I'm riled, I admit, at being dropped and so on. Still, I'm fair, I hope. It isn't that.'

'What then, old man?'

'Why, about this never taking anything to drink, teetotal business, etc. You've remarked that?'

'Haven't I? Wasn't I referred to them by Aunt

Dorcas when she saw me taking a long beer one day? Said it would lead to excess. Didn't I notice that Mr. Grandstone and Captain Wilton never took anything? And they were men of fortune and position *at home*.'

'And what did you answer?'

'Said it was a bad sign. I was wild, you bet. Told her straight out that men with nothing to be ashamed of or afraid of took their liquor like gentlemen. So I say now.'

'Your aunt would be ropeable?'

'I believe you,' answered his companion. 'Blew me up sky high. Said I was going headlong to perdition, and had lost the power of recognising high principle and self-denial when I saw them before my eyes. She had no patience with the young men of the present day.'

'Didn't one of them make a sort of explanation the first time they dined out?'

'Oh yes, neatly enough. The swell chappie—big man—asked for lemonade. Said very few society fellers took wine or spirits in England nowadays. Bad form and so on. He and Wilton had agreed not to touch anything stronger than "sodah" till they saw the old country again.'

'H'm, ha! *Bad sign*—fishy, I think so too. Of course all the women admire them more than ever.'

'Quite so. Been a run on lemonade ever since. Binns, at the cordial factory, says he'll make a fortune this year. Calls a new brand of soda-water "the Grandstone." Bowstead—where they stay—not so enthusiastic.'

'Time will tell, of course,' quoth Charlie oracularly. 'Nothing like a waiting race. By jove, what a bite!' as his float went down head-first like a dabchick, and his line tightened as if a young shark had impounded the bait.

'Patience, Jack, is our best ally. These temporary disturbances will subside. Some day all may yet go well, and after a little play we may each land our fish, just as this lovely silver bream—five pounds if he is an ounce—comes slowly but surely to grass.'

. . . . . .

If there was any one in Barradoo who thought she possessed a slight advantage in the confidence of the reserved but interesting strangers it was Miss Bellenden. That young lady, a statuesque brunette, had from the first been singled out by the tall, fair Grandstone, and felt, naturally, somewhat flattered by the preference. Mary Woodrose, the Major's only child, thought Captain Wilton 'a most interesting person to talk to, so well read, had travelled so much, quite unaffected too; her father enjoyed his society; she liked seeing them together. Then his descriptions of the foreign countries he had seen were so graphic—they quite carried you away from this dull country.'

In her artless way she essayed to discover more than had been confided to the public. 'They must be travelling merely for amusement,' she was sure. 'Did Mr. Grandstone *really* want to buy a station and settle in Australia? Was he so *very* rich as was stated? Had he known him long?'

These inquiries, hazarded now and then as

chance queries, were answered after a fashion. 'They had been friends in England. Both had a strong love of travel. Grandstone thought station life would suit him, but was uncertain in his movements. When their visit to Blocksleigh was over, he would make up his mind. For *himself*, he had fully decided upon his course. He would return to Australia, if—if—only—other arrangements'—here his eyes became bright and expressive—'if, that is to say, everything went right.' Over Mary Woodrose's delicately fair cheek stole a tell-tale blush, and the conversation took another turn.

Miss Bellenden, on her part, tested her influence, with a view to unravel the mystery. She secured an apparently larger and more unexpected slice of information. Stroking his blond moustache, and assuming a diplomatic expression, borrowed from practice in private theatricals, Mr. Grandstone asked the young lady whether he could rely on her secrecy. In an agitated voice she gave the required assurance.

'Well, then, my dear Miss Bellenden, let me confide to you that upon leaving England, Wilton and I, in order to avoid the bother of curiosity and attention, agreed to change names and characters.'

'Changed names!' said the girl, with a sudden tone of intense surprise. 'What an extraordinary thing to do! And characters? What do you mean?'

'If I had had the slightest idea that Australia was such a charming place, with such cultivated fascinating people, I should never have been a party to the innocent deception, I assure you.'

'But what can your reason be? You raise my curiosity,' almost gasped the damsel. 'Was he a duke's eldest son? What could it be?'

'Fact is'—here the diplomatic expression stole over his naturally frank features—'Wilton is a man of fabulous wealth, slightly affected here' (he tapped his forehead significantly). 'He is really Walladmor of Walladmor—tremendous estates in the North, don't you know? Well, nothing but continuous travel and change of scene prevents frightful fits of despondency, in any one of which he may destroy himself. You've remarked his expression of eye? Sort of glare?'

'I always thought they were *too* bright,' murmured Miss Bellenden. 'But what a dreadful thing! And poor Mary—that is—and you are——'

'Point of fact, I'm his guardian-keeper, if you like—*pro tem.* Captain Mark Wilton, late Sixth Dragoon Guards, very much at your service. Assumed the business as a blind. Family give me two thousand a year to look after him.'

'Good gracious! How sad—how very shocking!—I mean what a dreadful pity that anything should be the matter with him! And you're quite sure that he's beyond recovery? Might not a happy attachment—you know there have been such cases.'

'Worst thing in the world for him,' said Mr. Grandstone, in a wholly different tone from that employed by him at first. 'Bring on cerebral excitement. Quite frightens me to think of it. But you'll keep our secret? I've never breathed it before to a living soul.'

'You need not fear my revealing one word,'

replied Miss Bellenden, with a slight accession of coldness and dignity. 'But I can't see why you should have taken all this trouble to mystify people, when there's nothing to be gained by it. Poor Mr. Walladmor—that is, Captain Wilton, I mean—it's horribly confusing. I shall never believe you *are* a military man, somehow. The character doesn't seem to suit you.'

Shortly after this momentous disclosure the two friends went to pay their promised visit to Blocksleigh Hall, leaving behind them such a stock of conversational matter as the dwellers in Barradoo had not had in hand for many a day. The coming election of a member to represent the district fell flat before its fascinating mystery. When the tea-table authorities remarked upon the attentions which Captain Wilton had been paying to Mary Woodrose,—as to what a suitable match it would be, with regrets that he wasn't a medical man, as the town wanted another—Miss Bellenden sighed and remained silent.

When the friends of Miss Bellenden triumphantly alluded to Mr. Grandstone's fortunate position and great expectations, Mary Woodrose didn't respond, giving an impression that she didn't attach as much importance to these gratifying facts as the inhabitants of Barradoo.

'She's a trifle jealous of Kate Bellenden, poor dear,' suggested one interlocutor charitably. 'It must be hard upon her to see such a prize captured before her eyes—but what girl in Barradoo has a chance with Kate?'

In three weeks or thereabouts, the illustrious

strangers returned to the town. They had been induced to lengthen their stay at Blocksleigh Hall. There had been picnics and shooting parties for their especial benefit, kangaroo battues, improvised dances, all manner of festivities and excursions. Men had been specially invited up from the Union Club, and between riding and driving, coursing and billiards by day, with a trifle of whist and nap at night, their time had been fully occupied. Mr. Grandstone was lost in amazement at finding the 'bush' so redolent of 'beer and skittles,' so to speak, and never ceased wondering how the money had been made which supported so costly an *entourage*.

'Monstrous pleasant, I'm sure,' he was heard to remark, 'but not much of the younger son about it, except going to a far country, you know. Might as well be in Wales or Scotland.'

'Never mind, Grandstone, my boy,' said Mr. Blocksleigh, slapping him familiarly on the back, 'wait till the Agricultural Show in Barradoo is over. I've promised to go this year. Chance of his Lordship coming up, I hear. Then I'll drive you and the Captain to one of my places, Outer Back Balah. There you'll see bush-life in earnest.'

'Suit me down to the ground. Should like a change to backwoods life. What do you say, Wilton?'

'First-rate idea; but hadn't we better go quietly up there before the Show, and wait there till our good host here joins us? Better, I think, in many ways, eh?'

Mr. Grandstone was evidently undecided, a strange

look of hesitancy stole over his face. But Mr. Blocksleigh broke in.

'What, go *before the Show*—and the Ball too! Why, no girl in Barradoo would ever speak to us again. Besides I'm President of the P. & A. Society. I daren't be absent. Say it's a settled thing, and we'll drive four-in-hand to the Willandra Cowall afterwards.'

'Afraid we're putting you to an awful lot of inconvenience,' said the Captain formally; 'but really, we have business in Sydney which may prevent us from staying to the Show after all.'

'No use, old man,' said the host, with imperious good-nature; 'you're bound to go through with it, once you've begun. Grandstone, I'm sure Miss B. expects to see you at the Ball. Most likely His Excellency met some of your people at home, too. Must stay. No get-away.'

Mr. Grandstone looked at one and the other with doubtful gaze, before he spoke with his usual deliberation.

'A fellow must have his way sometimes, Wilton,' he said. 'Partly promised to be at the Show, don't you know. Awfully well worth seeing, they tell me. We can look up the desert afterwards. What do you say?'

'Just what I did at first. But as you are determined to take your own way, I suppose you must. You know my reasons.'

'Don't think they hold good, in this case. Blocksleigh, old boy, I'm your man till the Carnival's over.'

. . . . . .

That afternoon all Barradoo was in possession of the fact that the visitors had returned to their quarters at the Woolpack, and were pledged to remain over the Show. Nothing more was wanted to complete the felicity of the inhabitants, already exhilarated by the crowning triumph of the Governor's promised visit.

During the week that elapsed between the settlement of this truly momentous question, and the wildly exciting opening day of the Show, things apparently settled down into something like their normal condition of cheerful monotony. Whispers, of course, circulated in the social atmosphere—some of a thrilling and melodramatic nature, others of the light and sportive kind, which in the air of the interior settlements would seem to be spontaneously generated. Then the ball; a fancy ball, too—certain to be the best since the one Mr. Blocksleigh gave in the Town Hall the year he won the wool trophy at the Exhibition, in honour of that world-wide triumph. That he did the thing well, when he set about it, nobody could deny. It was some time since he had done anything for the good of the town, though. Perhaps in the expansion of his feelings, as the Governor was coming, he might. Whether or no, a man-of-war was in, and some of the officers were coming up with the Governor's party.

Then beneath the smooth surface of the social tide there were eddies and currents of distinct sway and tendency. Captain Wilton had continued to be so 'marked in his attentions' to Mary Woodrose that all the best-informed tea-tables were unanimous

in their vote that the Major ought to 'speak to him,' in case he exhibited indecision at the hour of departure.

About Kate Bellenden and Mr. Grandstone no satisfactory conclusion was arrived at. He seemed calmly appreciative, as usual. But was no longer 'in her pocket' perpetually, as one fair critic graphically described it. Certainly he did not pay any one else any attention. That was something. Perhaps Kate herself had cooled off. She was a wide-awake girl when you knew her (this from a school friend). And more than that, Charlie Towers had come on again. Anyhow, he was seen driving her out to the racecourse last Saturday, to see Miss Gaythorn take Lorraine over the steeplechase jumps. Though this was held to be suspicious by the conclave, it separated without any definite deduction being formulated, if we may except the exclamation of a severe matron: 'How men *can* be such fools as to let that girl play fast and loose with them, *I* can't imagine.'

Finally the great day arrived; the great man also—His Excellency Lord Warrington, with certain military and naval magnates in his train, the very thought of whose uniforms caused the hearts of the country maidens to palpitate strangely; other nobles and notables also. The town was more than crowded. In the hotels rooms had not been procurable for weeks previously. Mr. Blocksleigh's four-in-hand and turn-out excited nearly as much attention as the Governor himself, from the fact of his being enabled to exhibit the English strangers thereon, though good judges declared Ralph Wardour's

team superior in style and breeding. As for spectators—

> Shame on the false Etruscan
> Who lingers in his home, etc.

which means that every squatter, free selector, farm labourer, and station hand, within a hundred miles of the township, was present at that most memorable of all the Barradoo Shows.

It was a paradisal day, all blue and golden. Dustless, for a smart shower had fallen within forty-eight hours, yet bright-hued, tender, glowing, breezy as an Arcadian summer morn. Every one—horses included—was in the highest possible spirits. The drags, phaetons, buggies, dogcarts, and waggonettes rattled and rumbled out from the town in one long procession. All the society personages, arrayed in the freshest of spring fashions, if they did not eclipse Solomon in all his glory, nevertheless made a requisite and desirable impression upon those whom it was intended to subjugate.

The Governor was, as usual, most affable and intelligently appreciative. The Mayor, the Police Magistrate, and all the principal inhabitants were duly presented, lastly the two illustrious strangers, through the medium of the Aide-de-camp, who was personally acquainted with Mr. Blocksleigh. The Viceroy was politely pleased to make their acquaintance, even vouchsafing the remark that he was sure he had seen Captain Wilton before in the old country, but could not at that moment recollect where.

Then the Aide-de-camp directed His Excellency's

attention to the Amazonian troop as they filed into the fenced arena below the grand stand, and took their places, preparatory to facing the jumps. That high official had seen numbers of fine horses, good sheep, and well-bred cattle in the show-yards of Britain before landing on Australian shores. He frankly admitted, however, that never before had he beheld a cavalry troop of pretty girls so exceptionally well mounted, who rode so fearlessly over timber so stiff. When Miss Gaythorn, a South Coast native, disdaining the regulation fence, ran her horse at the wing, a foot higher, and after a flying leap came down, sitting as composedly as if she had just pulled up from a canter, His Excellency was strongly moved to admiration. When Miss Queenbie, reared on a cattle station amid the mountain ranges of the Upper Hume, forced the unwilling gray, after an unsuccessful attempt to baulk, to take the fence at the rate of forty miles an hour, throwing up her whip hand as he landed from a tremendous fly over the middle post, His Excellency made as if, but for State reasons, he would have liked to shy his vice-regal hat in the air. But a yet more exciting surprise was in store for the genial Pro-consul, for the great congregation generally.

Captain Wilton and Lord Lacrosse, one of His Excellency's suite, were evidently having a confidential conversation, much to the wonder and admiration of all Barradoo, in which they evidently, for the moment, forgot their surroundings. Suddenly the Captain said, 'Bless my soul! where's Grandstone? I've not seen him lately. Have you?'

'I suppose he won't get lost,' answered the other.

'You seem anxious about him. When I saw him last, he was walking towards the booths at the back of the ground.'

'I'll look him up, if you'll allow me,' said Wilton. 'We're so used to hunt in couples that he feels quite lost out here—you've just hit the expression—if I'm not near him.'

'Good Gad!' exclaimed his lordship, 'who, in Heaven's name, can that be? Is it part of the Show?

For at that moment a tall man, bareheaded, and in his shirt sleeves, walked through a side gate, and planted himself immediately in front of the Governor's private compartment. In his hand he held a high-crowned hat, not unlike a fool's cap, with bells attached, which he shook violently from time to time. He waved his hand scornfully towards the Amazons, who, having just finished their contest, were retiring towards the starting-point, pending the final allotment of prizes by the judges.

Then he placed the hat solemnly upon his head, and thus addressed the Governor in a loud voice—

'Unworthy delegate of the Royal power, you sit there like a Roman Emperor of the decadence, amusing yourself amid a degraded populace with paltry contests, while the British Empire is endangered. Know you not that within this very hour Russia has declared war with England, while France and Germany are at death grips? A hostile fleet, ordered here, may be expected at any moment. Would you ask who I am? Learn, minion, that you see Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, despatched here by telegraph to warn this people of their danger and

deprive you of your rank and office. Consider yourself under arrest!'

All this was uttered so rapidly that there was scant time for interruption. The people generally were under the impression that it was some kind of impromptu performance of the minstrel bands or other mummers always permitted at Show time. They had not recognised the speaker, and it was only when he concluded his tirade with a loud whoop, and, casting his cap and bells into the arena, prepared to ascend the steps of the grand stand that misgivings assailed them.

Captain Wilton was the first to speak. 'Great God!' he said, 'it's Grandstone. He must have been drinking brandy at the booths. It always makes him fancy himself the Prince of Wales. He did the same thing at Ascot last year. Whisky turns him into the Emperor of Germany.' And with this brief explanation he rushed frantically down the steps, and, grasping the illusionist by the arm, led him unresistingly to the rear.

The murder was out. Mr. Grandstone was evidently 'off his head.' Whether the derangement was chronic or merely dipsomaniacal none could say. The excitement was unparalleled. Some of the ladies screamed; one fainted. His Excellency's expression was one of surprise, tinctured with sympathy. Mr. Blocksleigh, the A.D.C., and a few of the young men, among whom were Charlie Towers and Jack Ainslie, hastily followed the Captain, and arrived just in time to see Mr. Grandstone hustled into a cab, which dashed off in the direction of the town. Fortunately the hunter trials came next, as to

which there was a trifle of betting. This, combined with the interest produced by the stiff jumps at which they were ridden, absorbed the chief attention of the crowd.

At the Ball that evening everybody was aware that Captain Wilton had called for his account directly after arriving at the Woolpack, recommending his friend to lie down and rest the while. After a prompt settlement, and most liberal douceurs to all the servants, they had left by the late train for Sydney. Beyond regretting to Bowstead that his friend should have been taken suddenly ill on the show-ground, owing to the heat of the weather, the Captain had not volunteered further information. Within a week their names were seen in the list of outward-bound passengers by the Messageries mail steamer *Marengo*, on board of which luxurious *paquebot* the passengers were alternately fascinated by the social qualities of 'le Capitaine Villeton,' and distressed at the mysterious attacks which compelled 'Sir Grandstonne' to keep his cabin for days at a time.

In lonely and deserted Barradoo, meanwhile, the germs of sound, satisfactory, complicated, and mysterious gossip have been safely implanted. With careful nursing the crop might be trusted to last nearly to the next Show.

'Wasn't it like Kate Bellenden to draw off at the last moment from the poor fellow?—after all the encouragement she gave him too! Positively shameful, I call it. No wonder he went off his head. And now that fool of a Charlie Towers is as mad about her as ever. Serve her well right if he had dropped her for good and all.'

This was the charitable and forbearing line taken by one section of the community, not wholly unprejudiced, it may be surmised, as comprehending the mammas with marriageable daughters and unappreciated sons.

'Serve all you girls right for running after a couple of strangers fit to break your necks, without knowing anything about them in the wide world. Might have both been married men for all you knew to the contrary.' This was the moral enforced by the chief banker, a middle-aged but susceptible bachelor, whose ascendency, previously unquestioned in matters of sentiment and fashion, had declined visibly since the advent of these meteoric strangers.

'But they were so nice,' pleaded a mischievous little debutante, with a plaintive *trainante* voice, who enjoyed teasing the financial Adonis. 'One had such lovely eyes, and both seemed so different from all the Barradoo people. Mary Woodrose said the first evening she saw them that there was nothing like a thorough-bred Englishman.'

'Thoroughbred fiddlesticks!' growled the provincial autocrat. 'We're all that, I hope, though we've had the luck to be born in a decent climate. Even you—unpatriotic little humbug as you are—I'd back for looks against any girl I ever saw at home. Nice thing Mary Woodrose has made of it! Likes wearing the willow, I suppose?'

'She got a long letter from the Captain last mail, though, with *such* a nice likeness of himself,' retorted the defender of the absent. 'He's coming out to marry her in a year, or she's going home, I don't know which. But *she's* satisfied.'

'If she doesn't mind living in a lunatic asylum it won't matter, perhaps,' muttered the *indigène* gloomily. 'Can't say I admire her taste.'

'Do you want to make me scream, Mr. Plumpton? Is *he* mad too? Is everybody that's nice out of their mind?'

'Hope not,' replied he, with practised readiness, 'or *you* would have to be locked up straight. But the A.D.C. told Blocksleigh and me before His Excellency that he was the well-known Captain Blank, a great authority on monomania, and owner of one of the best private lunatic asylums in England. Partly out of friendship, partly for an endowment to his pet hospital, he had undertaken to travel in charge of "Mr. Grandstone," who is in reality Sir Tudor Walladmor of Walladmor—terribly old family and immensely rich. Most exemplary fellow, but can't drink a glass of grog without fancying himself somebody else, royal personage mostly. Runs in the family. Dreadful affliction, isn't it?'

'Is *that* all?' demanded Miss Darrell, with scorn and indignation in every line of her expressive countenance. 'What a ridiculous fuss to make about a little eccentricity. You men *are* so jealous. Talk of girls, indeed! It's a lucky thing he didn't ask me. I'd have accepted him quick, and we might have been on our way to England, and left Barradoo to tattle about it till the day of judgment.'

'My dear Dollie,' quoth Mr. Plumpton paternally, 'you had better speak to your mamma, or wait till you are *quite* grown up before you decide on matters of importance. If you want to cure or reform people, suppose you commence a little

nearer home. I should have no objection to test your——'

But here the deeply displeased damsel, first casting upon the speaker a look of scorn, which became her style of feature immensely, darted out of the room.

. . . . . .

The substance of the foregoing conversation proved to be only too true. His Excellency and Lord Lacrosse had, after a while, recognised 'Wilton' as Captain Blank, a well-known reforming specialist in certain phases of lunacy. A man of iron nerve and active philanthropy, he had devoted an unexpected legacy to the practical exposition of his theory with regard to presumably curable cases. At the solicitation of General Grandstone, an early friend, to whom he was under obligations, he had undertaken to be Sir Tudor's guardian. How the trial of complete change of scene and surroundings terminated has been related.

For the rest, matters arranged themselves more or less satisfactorily, with the help of that experienced Master of the Ceremonies, old Father Time. Miss Mary Woodrose saw fit to accompany a married cousin to England in less than a year after all these wonders and surprises. In due course also appeared in both the *Times* and the *Argus* the following notice under the head of 'Marriages':—

'At St. George's, Hanover Square, —— ——, Esq., late Captain of 14th Royals, to Mary, only daughter of Major Woodrose, late of Her Majesty's 50th Regiment, and now resident at Barradoo, New South Wales, Australia.'

The names of certain titled personages appeared in the list of guests at the wedding, including—strange as it may appear—that of Sir Tudor Walladmor, the mention of whose marriage gift, a complete set of diamond ornaments, nearly brought tears into the eyes of some eager readers in far Barradoo.

Mrs. Plumpton (*née* Darrell) declares she doesn't believe he was mad at all, and only did it to get clear of Miss Bellenden, that all men are mad more or less, excepting that some are handsomer lunatics than others. As Charlie Towers and the Kate aforesaid had been married, and gone to live at Sandy Creek before the Captain's final surrender, it is possible that they understood the undercurrents, and as their mutual contentment is manifestly extreme and all-sufficing, perhaps it is no one's business to speculate upon what might have happened if—if—the sun hadn't been so hot on that memorable Show day. That day will never be forgotten in Barradoo, amid whose chronicles it is destined to flourish till its peppermint gums turn into poplars, and the avenue of eucalyptus globulus into cocoa-palms and bananas.

THE END

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